



✧ Ichiro Sakaki

Illustration Yuugen

Outbreak Company

THE POWER OF MOE

12

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"YOU'RE
AWFULLY COLD,
CONSIDERING
HOW LONG IT'S
BEEN."

GARIUS
DIDN'T SAY
ANYTHING,
BUT FOR
THE FIRST
TIME, HIS
FACE
SHIFTED.

GARIUS SLOWLY
CAME TO A HALT.
AFTER A BEAT-OF
HESITATION?—HE
TURNED TOWARD
THE OWNER OF
THE VOICE. THE
MOVEMENT SENT A
RIPPLE THROUGH
HIS LONG HAIR.



"GARIUS..."



Who Are
These People?

Myusel Fourant

Maid hired by the Holy Eldant Empire to serve their esteemed guest, Shinichi. She's an uncommon sight in this world: a half-elf (her mother was an elf and her father was a human). She served briefly in the military, and knows some magic she can use in a pinch. She's ashamed of her heritage, but she's a very serious young woman who's dedicated to her work. Okay, so maybe she's a little clumsy. To her surprise, Shinichi treats her just like anyone else, and she's started to feel an affection for him that goes beyond simple respect for her employer... She was one of the first people of Eldant to learn some Japanese, and now helps teach at Amutech's school.

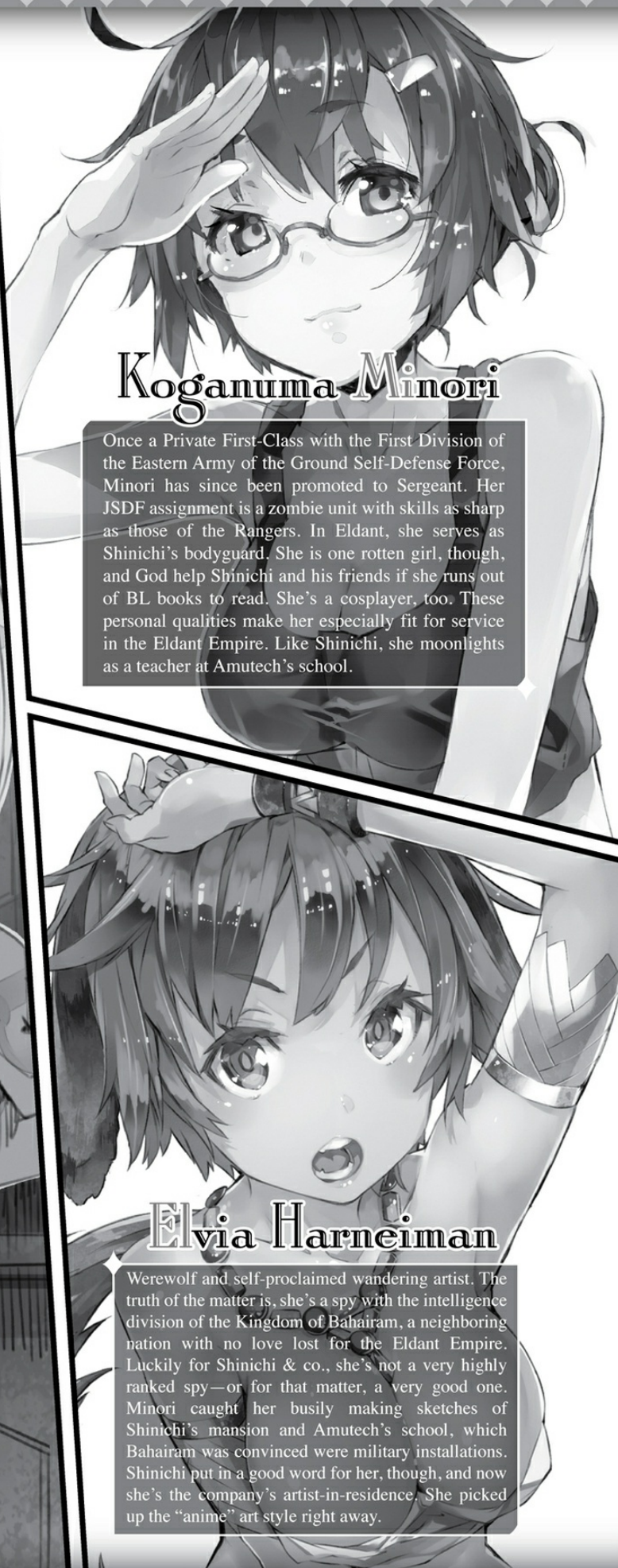
Kanou Shinichi

General Manager of Amutech, the general entertainment company; and the hero of our story. Amutech is a joint venture between the Holy Eldant Empire and the Japanese government, falling under the authority of the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau. The company's goal is to build international (or interdimensional) goodwill by importing Japanese anime, manga, games, and so on—basically, otaku stuff. Shinichi was a shut-in for nearly a year after entering high school, but his parents finally told him he had to get a job. Well, he found one, and before he knew what was happening, it landed him in another world! He has a dad (a light-novel author), a mom (an ero-game designer), and a little sister (Shizuki). He's otaku to the bone, and he's always true to himself—sometimes to a fault. Myusel has taught him to use just a little magic.



Petralka an Eldant III

Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire. She's not as young as she looks, but boy is she cute. (Not very well-endowed, though.) Her natural curiosity made her receptive to the Japanese government's plan to import otaku culture. In fact, she's a bit of an otaku herself—she was one of the first people in Eldant to learn some Japanese, and she did it by watching anime. (So it is possible!) She actively supports Shinichi and his activities.



Koganuma Minori

Once a Private First-Class with the First Division of the Eastern Army of the Ground Self-Defense Force, Minori has since been promoted to Sergeant. Her JSDF assignment is a zombie unit with skills as sharp as those of the Rangers. In Eldant, she serves as Shinichi's bodyguard. She is one rotten girl, though, and God help Shinichi and his friends if she runs out of BL books to read. She's a cosplayer, too. These personal qualities make her especially fit for service in the Eldant Empire. Like Shinichi, she moonlights as a teacher at Amutech's school.

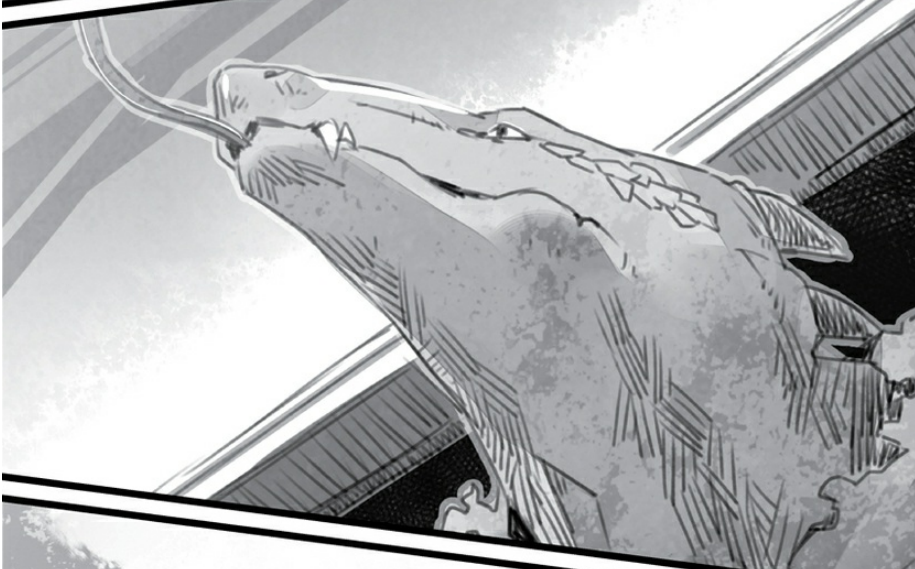
Elvia Harneiman

Werewolf and self-proclaimed wandering artist. The truth of the matter is, she's a spy with the intelligence division of the Kingdom of Bahairam, a neighboring nation with no love lost for the Eldant Empire. Luckily for Shinichi & co., she's not a very highly ranked spy—or for that matter, a very good one. Minori caught her busily making sketches of Shinichi's mansion and Amutech's school, which Bahairam was convinced were military installations. Shinichi put in a good word for her, though, and now she's the company's artist-in-residence. She picked up the "anime" art style right away.

A black and white manga-style illustration of a young woman with long, dark hair and bangs. She is wearing a light-colored, ruffled dress and has a gentle, smiling expression. The background is dark with some light spots.

Ayasaki Hikaru

Two things to know about Hikaru: one, he's a cross-dresser; two, the person he usually cross-dresses as is Suiren from *Rose Princess*. The Japanese government sent him to Eldant to take over from Shinichi. Hikaru's not just a pretty face, after all: he knows his otaku stuff, can talk like nobody's business, and pretty much seems (well, seemed) practically perfect in every way. The one thing he didn't know was anything about what things were really like in Eldant, and after one of his plans went completely off the rails (and Shinichi saved him), he now helps out at Amutech as Shinichi's assistant.

A black and white manga-style illustration of a lizardman with a long, thin snout and a small, curled tongue. He has a serious expression and is wearing a dark, textured garment. The background is dark with some light spots.

Brooke Darwin

Shinichi's gardener. Calm. Composed. One might almost say cold-blooded. Let's see, what else? Wise. Long-tongued. Scaly. Huh? Oh! He's a lizardman. So there's that. Brooke is a former soldier and something of a hero among his people, but circumstances forced him away from his home and family to live among the humans.

A black and white manga-style illustration of a man with a high forehead, receding hair, and a serious expression. He is wearing a dark suit jacket over a white shirt and a dark tie. The background is dark with some light spots.

Cerise Darwin

Brooke's wife. The daughter of an important chieftain, she's something like lizardman nobility. Circumstances conspired to keep her and her husband apart for a while, but now they live together at Shinichi's mansion, where Cerise helps Myusel with the housework.

A black and white manga-style illustration of a man with a high forehead, receding hair, and a serious expression. He is wearing a dark suit jacket over a white shirt and a dark tie. The background is dark with some light spots.

Matoba Jinzaburou

Chief of the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau. (Remember that from the first page here? No? It's the organization set up by the Japanese government to facilitate contact with the Holy Eldant Empire.) Matoba can appear very laid-back and even easygoing, but he's no one to sneeze at. Otaku and their mysterious ways, though, are something he knows nothing about.



Garius en Cordobal

Petralka's cousin, a member of the royal family, and also a knight. (That's some resume.) Garius's parents (Petralka's aunt and uncle) and Petralka's parents once fought over the succession, leading to their collective and mutual death by poisoning. As a compromise between the factions that had been backing these respective claimants to the throne, Petralka was made Empress while Garius was assigned to be her Regent. He himself, though, has scant interest in the crown, and does all he can to support Petralka, especially as regards military matters. He's always had a special interest in men (if you know what we mean), and combined with Minori's instinctive appreciation for the same, well...

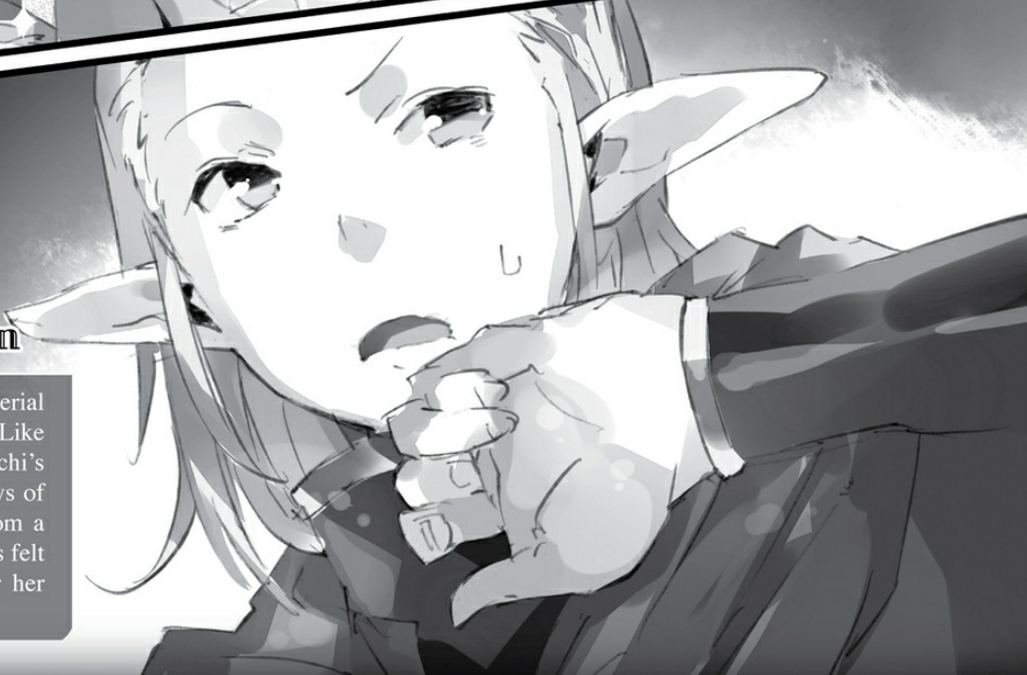
Romilda Guld

A dwarf girl. Her father Rydel Guld is a famous craftsman and a counselor in the Eldant Empire. He owns one of the biggest workshops in Marinos, the imperial capital. Romilda attends Shinichi's otaku culture school, and is a pretty accomplished otaku herself by now. Elves and dwarves are supposed to get along like cats and dogs, but Romilda and Loek have become fast friends.



Loek Slayson

An elf boy. His father is the imperial counselor Eric Slayson. Like Romilda, Loek attends Shinichi's school and has absorbed the ways of the otaku. Minori saved him from a near-fatal situation once, and he's felt something he thinks is love for her ever since.



Chapter One: Marriage? Well, that Came Out of Left Field

The room was dead silent. How silent? My breathing and the beating of my heart seemed impossibly loud in my own ears.

The population density at our mansion wasn't exactly high to begin with. We had a house with more than twenty rooms, and all of seven people to fill it—two of whom often weren't even there. Quiet was the norm around here. Honestly, for a twenty-first-century Japanese person like me, this house was almost too big to handle.

The silence that seemed to freeze everything around me at this moment, though—it was something different. Because I wasn't alone. There was someone else in the room with me.

I was in my office. The walls were crammed with bookshelves overflowing with manga and light novels and picture collections and anime DVDs. The desk in my office was a big, sturdy piece of furniture, much too heavy to move by myself. The overall look of the place was sort of medieval European, making the manga and (etc. etc.), along with shelves devoted to figures of anime and game characters, stand out all the more.

Well, the room *did* belong to an otaku.

As I sat at the desk working, a lone young woman stood across from me in the doorway of the room. She wore a deep-navy dress under a white apron, and long, flaxen hair framed her face. She was crowned with that epitome of maid-ness, the frilly headband. No matter how you cut it, she was for sure a real and true maid-san. She had an open, honest face and perfect features which, combined with that outfit (the picture of purity itself) made for a deeply affecting impression.

Myusel Fourant. Maid of this mansion.

For a no-account son of the common class like me, a real maid—not a cosplayer at some convention or café—might as well have belonged to the

realm of fantasy already, but Myusel went the extra mile: her ears were pointed. She belonged to that tribe that looks so nearly human, but isn't quite—the elves. Myusel was a half-elf, the offspring of an elf and a human.

A half-elf, a maid, and gorgeous to boot. She ticked all the moe boxes, was like the ultimate moe weapon, and ever since she had brought me my afternoon tea a few moments ago, she had just been standing there. I had work I really needed to get done, so I didn't spend long chatting with her, but instead of just turning and leaving like she usually did, she had been watching me from the doorway.

A long moment. I didn't say anything. She didn't say anything. I listened to my breathing and my heartbeat a little more.

This felt... weird.

Myusel wasn't, like, staring me down or anything; she had a sort of smile on her face. In fact, she was looking at me with genuine kindness, but still... having someone just look at me, even look at me nicely, was starting to weird me out.

What was going on?

Now that I thought about it, ever since Amatena and Clara, a couple of soldiers from the neighboring kingdom of Bahairam, had hidden out at our house, I'd felt like Myusel had been acting different somehow. It was like... she was spending more time around me. She would give me whatever she had brought, or clean whatever needed to be cleaned, but then she would just sort of hang around.

She was still getting all her work done, and done well, so it wasn't up to me to tell her how to use her free time. But this...

Hmmm...

Not to brag, but the number of years I have *not* had a girlfriend is exactly equal to the number of years I've been alive. That's just the kind of otaku I am. So being alone with a beautiful young woman like Myusel—if you asked whether I felt more happy or more kind of embarrassed about it, I think embarrassed would win by a nose.

Hey... I am alone with a beautiful young woman here.

Was it just me overthinking things that I felt like Myusel was going out of her way to make this time together?

“H-Hey, uh, Myusel?”

“Yes?”

“Can I ask, uh, what you’re doing?”

“What?” For a second, she glanced shyly at the ground. “Oh, er, I’m just... waiting on you, Shinichi-sama.”

Waiting? Waiting... W-A-I-T-I-N-G. Hmmm.

Well, okay, so the dictionary definition she had in mind was probably the one that goes “to attend to a person of higher status,” or “to be present and ready to act,” so I guess it didn’t seem strange to her. But in this context, I definitely most associated that word with the expression “to make a beautiful woman wait on you,” and I couldn’t quite let go of the idea. And why did Myusel look so flustered about it?



Arrgh! All right, self, calm down.

“U—Um, Shinichi-sama?” Myusel’s expression suddenly darkened. “Am I bothering you...?”

“Huh? No, no!” I was suddenly slammed by a feeling of guilt. Myusel’s anxious expression—a look that suggested she might burst into tears the very next moment—really tugged at my heartstrings somehow. “No, you’re not. Definitely not. I swear you’re not.” I shook my head vigorously. “It’s just... I’m worried you’ll get bored, hanging around me with nothing to do...”

“Perish the thought,” Myusel said, shaking her head almost as hard as I had. “Just being with you, Shinichi-sama, is—” Her voice got stronger and stronger, but suddenly she stopped, putting her hands to her chest, as if to say her heart was full to overflowing. Her eyes kept drifting to the ground, and there was a little flush in her cheeks.

Yiiikes... That’s totally unfair, Myusel.

With those gestures and that expression, I was practically— I was already— Hey, calm down, self. Myusel is just— Half-elves faced a lot of discrimination. So she felt a lot of gratitude to me, as someone who not only didn’t discriminate against half-elves, but was positively moe about them. But it was gratitude, not love. Of course not.

Once, long ago, I’d badly, and very embarrassingly, misjudged my relationship with an old friend. To her, we were just that—old friends. But I got it into my head that she liked me, you know, as a guy. Forgetting that as far as most of the world was concerned, I was “sick.” A “weirdo.” In short: an otaku.

That experience left me with very little confidence in matters of love—and even less in stuff that looked like nothing more than a happy fantasy. I had virtually no confidence at all, but... and yet... was this... could it be... just... maybe?

Arrgh, I’ll never get any work done this way!

But seriously, could it maybe really be?

But, but, if I carelessly tried to find out, only to discover that it really was just

another mistake on my part, I didn't think I would recover this time. The humiliation would set me digging a hole to hide in faster than a spinning Je* Mogura, and I would probably just stay there for the rest of my life.

But... But...!

Are you sure about this, Shinichi?! She's a half-elf, a maid, obviously beautiful, plus she's got the twintails, and the clumsy-but-upbeatness, and she's a great cook, and she's very diligent, and she knows how to dress (can't believe I saw her in a swimsuit once!!), and—if you let this perfect girl get away now, there might never be another... another chance...!

I knew it was a little late to be thinking about all this, but once the thoughts started, I couldn't stop them. My heart kept pounding faster and faster. My brain kept revving harder and harder, but it wasn't in gear.

I found myself standing up from my desk and going over to Myusel. I couldn't just sit there. I didn't know exactly what to do, but I had to do something.

"Shinichi-sama...?" She blinked her big eyes, lavender like jewels. Were they brimming just a little bit, or was that my imagination?

"Myusel..." I stopped in front of her. We were so close, we could feel each other's breathing.

Myusel was sort of caught between me and the wall. ".....Shinichi-sama..." But when she looked up at me, there was no fear or disgust. In fact, she glanced away again, her cheeks flushing, and then she summoned her resolve and looked straight at me. I was glad to know she wasn't upset with us standing here like this. Probably. I was pretty sure. I didn't think.

So... okay, was it time for, you know? The *kabe-don*? The wall thump? Not the Mom-bring-me-food! one, but the one that Reals used to show they knew what they wanted? The legendary, the famous... Was now the time?! Was Gaia whispering to me, *Become a Real!*?

Should I just sweep her delicate body up in my arms and— "Shinichiiiiii!!"

It only lasted an instant. The silence surrounding us was shattered by someone shouting so loud I thought the roof would cave in, followed by my office door being opened hard enough it threatened to fly off its hinges.

Which naturally meant...

“Hrgh?!”

...that I, standing right by the door, took a huge slab of aged wood square in the jaw. I went tumbling to the ground, away from Myusel.

“Shinichi-sama?!” I could hear Myusel exclaiming in concern. I guess she must not have been hurt. Phew. That was good. *If you’re all right, Myusel, then I’m content. Even if this does hurt like a b—* Yes! Yes, I know. I’m not exactly cut out to be the star of some romantic drama.

Stupid God, this is all your fault!

...Okay, wait.

“Wh-What the heck?”

“Is Shinichi here?! ...Oh, Shinichi. What are you doing there?”

Into my room burst a diminutive young woman, walking with an authority you could practically hear. Her long hair was a pure silver color, her skin as white as porcelain, her features finely formed. She was lovely, but not ostentatious. As delicate as a doll. A tiara of gold and rubies sat on her head, so appropriate it almost looked like a part of her.

She was so short, she wouldn’t have looked out of place wearing an elementary-schooler’s backpack, but she was actually seventeen years old.

Petralka an Eldant III: the Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire, the country I was now living in. Maybe the word “princess” would have fit her vibe better, but she was really and truly Her Majesty the Empress, and that was that.

She was also, as it happened, my boss.

Specifically, she was one of the investors in Amutech, general entertainment company and parallel-world first.

But anyway, moving on...

“What am I doing? Just being painfully reminded of my place in life,” I said, sketching aimlessly on the floor with my fingertip.

“Hm?” Petralka looked at me curiously for a minute, then spotted Myusel

standing in shock by the wall. "...Myusel."

"Y-Yes, Your Majesty." She sounded a little panicked.

"What was he doing?" Petralka asked, her eyes narrowing.

"What? Er, uh, n-nothing in particular..."

The empress didn't say anything, but she looked back and forth between me and Myusel as if she had her suspicions.

Finally the loli-looking empress said, "Ah, very well," and sighed.



The Holy Eldant Empire: the very first nation with which Japan made contact... in another world.

The place is technically contiguous with Japan, connected to the country by a hyperspace wormhole tunnel. The culture is pretty close to that of the Middle Ages Europe, and *most* of the people look like what we would consider Western Europeans.

Notice I said *most*. One of the most striking differences from our world is that in this one, there are elves, dwarves, and beast people, just walking around like it's no big deal. They have dragons and spirits, and what's really crazy is you can use magic here. Again, it's just part of normal, everyday life to these people. In a word, it's pretty much the sort of fantasy world we would only usually encounter in manga or anime or games or whatever.

The Japanese government decided that in order to foster friendly relations with the Holy Eldant Empire, they would do pretty much what they did with "Cool Japan"—export Japan's world-famous entertainment products to this new place. And to get the stuff over there, they established Amutech, a parallel-world-first entertainment company. But a company has to have a manager, and they picked me—Kanou Shinichi.

Wellll... It did turn out that Amutech was nothing but a front for a plan of cultural invasion, and when I found out and raised a stink, Japan did try to assassinate me. Let's just say a lot has happened. But anyway.

"So, Petralka..."

We had moved from my office into the living room. I might have been busy, but Petralka was my employer. I couldn't just boot her out without so much as a pleasant hello. Amutech was actually funded equally by investment from the Japanese and Eldant governments, so the empress technically owned half the company. For that matter, she also owned the house I was staying in.

"What brings you here?" I asked. "I didn't think you were getting out of the castle much these days."

Petralka raised her cup and took an elegant sip of tea. Not long after I had arrived here, Petralka had been held hostage in a terrorist incident involving a group called Bedouna, a.k.a the Assembly of Patriots. As you can tell by the fact that I'm still talking about her, the terrorists were safely subdued and Petralka was rescued—but the Eldant monarch had never been captured by an anti-government force before. Obviously, some of the responsibility fell on her bodyguards and the people who managed the empire's security, but Petralka also found she was not as free to leave the castle as she had once been. Once upon a time, she would routinely stop by my mansion or the school for a visit with just two or three escorts, but not anymore.

"But here we are. Are you suggesting we cannot drop in on you?" Petralka puffed out her cheeks poutily. It was really awfully cute, and made me just want to give her a hug and pat her on the head. But considering how sensitive Petralka was about her youthful looks, saying the wrong thing could get her really upset, even if you meant it well. And an angry empress could, in theory, mean losing your head on a charge of *lèse-majesté*.

"No, of course you can, but..."

"We have been careful to bring bodyguards with us. Including some magic users. Any ordinary attacker would be repelled instantaneously."

"She's telling the truth—I see five people waiting outside," Koganuma Minorisan reported, looking out the window. She was a few years older than me, and wore a uniform and glasses; she was my bodyguard and our resident WAC. She was a real peach with a sweet look and easygoing attitude. The kind of person you took one look at and said, "Oh, okay, a warm-and-fuzzy older-sister type." But you might not guess that she was a capable sniper and a killer hand-to-hand

fighter.

One thing about her appearance stood out more than any other, though, and it was that D-cup (or was that E-or F-cup? Or G-or H-? How far did these letters go?), bouncy, jouncy, outrageous chest. But just forget about that for now.

“It looks like Garius-san isn’t with you, though?”

If he had been, I assumed he would have come into the house with her. Garius en Cordobal was Petralka’s cousin and a major player in the Eldant Empire, charged with overseeing military matters and the police. His silver hair and emerald eyes made it obvious at a glance that he was Petralka’s blood relative, but on top of that he was awfully handsome, and smart to boot. In Japan we say “Heaven doesn’t give two gifts,” but this guy seemed to have gotten three or four.

“Ooh, Shinichi-kun, eager to see Garius-san? Well well well well well well well!” Minori-san leaned toward me, looking inordinately pleased.

She was, I should be clear, highly reliable and totally someone you could count on, but she also had a nasty habit of trying to fix me up with Garius, the product of a particular proclivity of hers. Namely, she was a fujoshi, and sweet man-on-man romance was her moe of choice. Everything Garius and I said or did seemed to reach her through that filter.

Actually, in Garius’s case specifically, she hardly needed a filter half the time—he was right there with her. It could make things more complicated than they had to be.

“I’m not eager to see him,” I said with a sigh. “It’s just that if he were in command of the bodyguards, I could understand why there are so few of them.”

But without Garius, five people didn’t seem like nearly enough for Her Majesty to be out and about with. I mean, I knew she couldn’t have fifty or a hundred people with her all the time like some kind of feudal daimyo, but still.

I turned to Petralka. “Does this mean something came up in a hurry?” That might explain it: she just didn’t have time to get a whole entourage together. But...

“No, we would not say that,” Petralka replied calmly, taking another sip of her drink.

“Huh? Don’t tell me you just snuck out of the castle?”

“How *can* you use such language, Shinichi? The Empress goes where she pleases!” Petralka said with a frown.

“Well, sure, but...” If the empress had gone where she pleased without letting anyone know, Garius was probably going nuts looking for her right about now. “Garius-san isn’t going to be angry?”

I could imagine those handsome features, the very picture of beauty, with a manga-style throbbing vein at the forehead. Petralka might have been the empress, but Minister Garius en Cordobal was sort of an older brother to her. He was just about the only person I had ever seen rebuke Petralka in public, and if she was out here on her own volition, with no thought for security or safety, Garius was probably very, very upset.

Much like he had been when Petralka had stowed away with me on my trip to Japan.

So I sat there worrying, but: “Ye of little faith, Shinichi. Of course, we’ve received Garius’s permission.” Petralka gave me a little snort.

“He agreed to this?”

“Indeed.”

“Is he feeling okay?”

“He’s quite well.” Petralka nodded nonchalantly and set her tea cup on the table.

I hadn’t seen that coming. Garius tended to be, if anything, a little too crazed about Petralka’s safety. I was sure he was honestly concerned about her—not to mention that if anything happened to Petralka, for political reasons he would be a prime suspect (after all, he was next in line for the throne), and it would help keep his name clear if he was known to be fanatical about her security.

“As a matter of fact,” Petralka said, taking a bite of one of Myusel’s homemade tea cakes, “tomorrow, an ambassador from one of our allies will be

arriving.”

“An allied nation?”

I didn’t get out of the Eldant Empire very much, so I didn’t pay a lot of attention to the political situation, but I guess if there were enemy nations like Bahairam around, it made sense that there would be friendly ones as well.

“Some of our troops have been recalled from the provinces, and the capital city is on high alert. This moment is in fact far safer than normal for us to be away, so that even Garius cannot worry too much.”

That made sense. You would certainly want security to be at its highest when a friendly ambassador was coming for a visit. I absently pictured an occasion when the US President had come to Japan. You could see police officers on every street corner, news reporters were constantly remarking on the heightened security, and the entire country seemed permeated by a certain anxiousness. I had to figure that things were similar in the capital city of Marinos right now. Security forces would be watching out, not just for Petralka, but for every inch of the capital; one false move would probably get you arrested, or worse.

“He is, however, acting rather obsessed with his preparations.” Petralka was kicking her feet happily—maybe it was the feeling of freedom she was enjoying—but as she said this, her face darkened for a moment.

...Hm?

So it looked like she was happy to be able to go out, but also not one hundred percent comfortable. As the absolute ruler of the Holy Eldant Empire, Petralka spent a lot of her time in a pretty suffocating environment. And now, the chains had loosened just a bit—only for her to be told, “There’s an ambassador coming. I can’t spend all my time entertaining you.” A little boring, at best. She seemed a bit like a child who couldn’t get her big brother to play with her. I knew Petralka and Garius seemed pretty close.

Aaaaargh! Where does an empress get off being so darn cute?!

“If there’s a visitor coming tomorrow, does that mean we should skip our morning report?”

Normally, I went to Eldant Castle every morning to report on the current state of Amutech's activities. Typically Petralka and Garius both attended, along with the prime minister, Zahar. But honestly, a big part of the reason I did this was so that I could have an excuse to see Petralka, who normally couldn't leave the castle easily. It wasn't like things changed that much overnight. Once a week or even once a month probably would have been plenty. Plus, I submitted written reports as well. Officially, my excuse was that meeting directly with the empress allowed us to gauge each other's reactions in real time and get a clearer sense of how we were both feeling. It was as good a reason as any to go see Petralka.

"Not a bad idea," Minori-san said, nodding. "With a foreign ambassador coming, I'll bet it's not going to be quick or easy to get in the castle, and we wouldn't want to make any slip-ups and cause an incident."

"No, do come," Petralka replied. "And not just you, Shinichi. We wish Minori, Matoba, Hikaru—all the members of Amutech to be there."

"Huh? R-Really?"

Petralka nodded firmly. "Truth be told, part of our reason for coming here is to bring you this request. Our visitor has personally asked to meet with you all."

Minori-san's expression suddenly grew strained. "Your Majesty, are you saying—?"

Immediately, I understood. When Minori-san got that look on her face, it meant the subject had become politically or militarily charged. Myusel, though, still looked a bit confused. She was looking back and forth between us and Petralka.

"...You're telling me it's not just Bahairam. Other countries know about us, too."

"...Oh!" Myusel squeaked surprised. She wasn't technically involved with Amutech's business affairs, but by dint of living at the mansion, she had a fairly good idea of how the company was treated on the political front.

"Our visitor let it be known, indirectly, that they were aware of an ambassador from another world who had come to this land. And that they were distinctly interested in meeting him."

“Sigh,” Minori-san said, but then she shrugged. “I guess we weren’t exactly keeping it a secret.”

Spreading Japanese otaku culture here in the Eldant Empire—that was Amutech’s business. Strictly speaking, our mandate extended only to the Eldant Empire. After all, Amutech had begun as a covert vehicle of cultural invasion, and the government wanted to start by experimenting with the local nation with which they had made first contact.

But when I rebelled against the government’s plans, I also sort of broke out of their framework. Specifically, I had suggested a pilot program for introducing otaku stuff to neighboring countries, and Petralka had gone along with the idea. As a result, Japanese entertainment products—with a few Eldant touches like translations—were trickling into other nearby countries.

In fact, I had been captured by the Kingdom of Bahairam once in the past, after they learned of my existence and hoped to use me as a hostage. And if an enemy country had learned about me, why shouldn’t an allied one? What with the presence of trade relations and all, how could they *not* know about the Japanese entertainment products that were all the rage among the children of the Eldant nobility?

The thing was, this friendly ambassador had asked to meet with us officially. That meant they saw what we were importing as more meaningful, and perhaps more valuable, than just banal foreign amusements. They wanted to talk with us because they thought our stuff could have some kind of political influence.

One dirty little secret about this entire operation was that while it may have been underhanded of the Japanese government to use otaku goods as a tool of cultural invasion, they weren’t wrong about their effect.

“We have been trading with this country for a long time,” Petralka said quickly, sensing the tension in the air among us. “We do not believe they will misuse anything we give them. In fact, Garius spent time there as a student.”

“Really? He did?”

“Indeed. Though it was when our previous emperor still reigned.”

I didn’t know how long ago that would have been, how many years, but when

someone with a connection to the imperial family goes to study in your country, it means you two must be pretty close. On top of that, “studying abroad” in a place like this wasn’t like modern-day Japan, where you might do it just for the experience. There had to be some practical benefit to taking the time and trouble. Something specific you could learn that would justify sending a person to study. That meant this allied country must have excelled in something—politics? finance? military matters?—that attracted the attention of the Eldant Empire.

“So you see, we are not precisely in a position to refuse,” Petralka said. “We want you to come to the castle tomorrow.”

I glanced at Minori-san, but she gave no sign of disagreeing, so I nodded. “Yeah... sure thing.”

“Mm.” Petralka nodded in satisfaction, then finished her tea. Myusel promptly poured more into the empty cup.

“But did you really need to come all this way and tell us about this yourself, Petralka?” I asked. She could have just sent a messenger, I thought. Or for that matter, she could have just not said anything at all, and we would have shown up at the castle as usual the next morning.

“What?” Petralka asked, pursing her lips. “Are you dissatisfied that we have come to inform you?”

“No... Not, uh, dissatisfied at all...”

“Are we intruding upon you? Interrupting you?” Petralka eyed Myusel. “Interrupting a liaison with your maid, perhaps?”

“Nope! Uh-uh! Not it!” I shook my head violently.

“Then there is no problem.” Petralka crossed her legs and looked away.

Huh. Is she... pouting?

“I thought maybe you had dropped by for... you know, just a visit.”

Petralka had managed to turn the ambassador’s imminent arrival into an opportunity for a rare trip out of the castle. If she had chosen to spend that hard-won time with us... Well, that would make me very happy.

“A-An empress does not just ‘visit.’” Petralka still wasn’t looking at me, but she sounded a little less sure of herself. And was that a blush I saw in her cheeks? “We have a great many important matters to attend to.”

“Sure, of course. You’re right.”

“But, well... ahem.” Petralka seemed to have to force the words out a little. “Once in a while, even an empress needs a moment’s respite.”

“Sure,” I said again. I was glad to hear it.



We spent a couple of hours in an aimless, pleasant chat before Petralka went back to the castle, accompanied by her bodyguards.

“Mmm...” I came back to my office to resume my interrupted work. I was busy typing out a summary of my report. I liked writing well enough—maybe it had to do with having a light-novel author for a dad—but having to stick to a prescribed format, to just do paperwork, was kind of a pain in the neck.

As a point of interest, because the reports I created were submitted to both the Eldant authorities and the Japanese government, every single one of them had to be done twice, in the preferred format of the respective bureaucrats. In addition to the papers I submitted, the Japanese side also got written documents from Matoba-san and Minori-san, among others.

“...Ooof...”

My shoulders were starting to get really stiff. I stretched in my chair. This wasn’t exactly hard physical labor, but I could still feel it in my poor body. Physical work left you feeling warm all over, but the fatigue from desk jockeying like this felt like your entire body cooling down, gradually seizing up. You had to be sure to work yourself out every now and again, or you could get to where you were so frozen that one wrong move could result in a torn muscle. I needed a break. Yeah, that would be good for me.

Just then, almost as if on cue, I heard a knock at my door. “Shinichi-sama, it’s Myusel. I brought tea.”

“Thanks, come on in,” I said. Myusel entered with a tea cart. She stopped

beside me, taking a tea cake and saucer from the cart and putting them on my desk. The cake was like a sort of doughnut, small enough to eat with one hand, but also soft enough that it wouldn't get crumbs all over my desk. I hadn't specifically said anything: this was just one of Myusel's thoughtful little touches.

Mmm. What bliss.

"I'm sorry to bother you when you're trying to work."

"Your timing is perfect. I was just thinking it was time for a break."

"That's good," Myusel said, and smiled. I felt my heart skip a beat.

Just the two of us, alone in my office. It was... well, it was exactly how we'd been before Petralka had shown up. I wasn't sure how I felt about her arrival—half sort of disappointed, half like I'd been saved by the bell. But now? I didn't expect any more interruptions.

"Shinichi-sama?" Myusel asked, her head cocked like a curious little bird. I suddenly realized I'd been staring at her face.

I quickly shook my head to reassure her everything was all right. "It's nothing. Thanks, this looks delicious." Hoping to distract attention from the situation, I grabbed the sweet Myusel had brought. It was probably made by hand; it still radiated a gentle heat... I took a bite.

Ooh... That delicate sweetness. It filled my tired body.

"That's fantastic," I said, and I wasn't trying to flatter her. Then, feeling like I should offer more than two words of appreciation, I added, "You really can do anything, can't you, Myusel?"

"Thank you very much," she said shyly.

"I mean, you've got cooking conquered, housework honed to perfection..."

"Well, it's... those things are my job," Myusel said, but she was smiling. "And I still have so much to learn about all of them..."

"I can't imagine what!" I said, and suddenly the image of my little sister flashed through my mind. "Shizuki, she's hopeless when it comes to housework. Like, she's got brains for everything but that. You've gotta wonder if she'll ever be able to find a husband that way, heh! Not like you, Myusel, you could get

married any—”

Then I stopped.

Watch it, Kanou Shinichi.

This conversation was going in a very dangerous direction. I had to pick my next words extremely carefully. And I did need some next words: I couldn't just leave it there.

Arrgh, what to do?

“...any time you wanted, or... if you didn't want, you wouldn't... I mean... err...” I finished lamely.

“Married?” Myusel said, sounding slightly stupefied for a moment. But then she said, “Me? I... I don't think I could.” She glanced at the ground.

Woah! What was with this totally unexpected reaction?

No! Calm down, Shinichi. Self-consciousness is, like, one-half a word away from self-destruction!

That was it: Myusel didn't like me, you know, *that way*. She saw the conversation going in a weird direction, and just wanted to make it clear she wasn't interested in marrying the likes of me. But she had to be careful not to offend or hurt her master, so instead she said she couldn't get married, period.

“S-Say, um, Myusel?”

“For someone in my position... t-to even think of taking Her Majesty's rightful place...”

“Huh?” Why was she bringing up the empress? “What does Petralka have to do with this?”

Did she mean it was Petralka's “rightful place” to decide whether a simple maid could get married? Come to think of it, it wasn't something I had ever given much thought to before, but what was the marriage age for women here in the Eldant Empire? Back in, say, Warring States-Era Japan, a girl getting married at fifteen wouldn't have been uncommon. Could it be that Myusel and Petralka were both of marriageable age, maybe even starting to feel like they were getting old? Maybe it was actually normal in the Eldant Empire for brides

to be really, y’know, *young*?

Awww man, was this place secretly a loli paradise?!

As my thoughts spiraled off in a weird direction, Myusel was struggling to find the right words. “Wha? Er... ah, well... Her Majesty... You and she seem very...”

“What about Petralka and me?”

“She seems to... ahem... like you very much...”

“I guess? I mean, you don’t just drop by at the house of someone you hate, but...”

What did this have to do with who could get married and who couldn’t?

“No, you see...” Myusel started fidgeting industriously with her apron. “Her Majesty... Shinichi-sama, she... seems to... I-love you...”

“.....Come again?”

Love? Like, *love*-love? Like, ♪ all you need is love ♪ ?

I suddenly started to panic.

Who loves? What do they love?

Petralka? Loves me?

“Th-Th-That’s the silliest thing I ever—”

I waved vigorously with both hands. *Uh-uh! No way! Not even possible!*

We were talking about the Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire, right?! I was just a commoner, even if they did treat me like a VIP! A hard-core otaku and former home security guard, at that! So worthless he got rejected by his own childhood friend!

The empress—love me? I guarantee that’s not even a thing!

“P-Petralka? You think she—no way!”

Ahh, but I am a man! To hear such a thing, even if not from Petralka herself, but still, from a girl—part of me wonders, Could it be?, and that way lies ruin! Plus, I have high hopes for Petralka in the future—er, I mean, she’s really cute. Just the thought that a girl like her might like me—my heart won’t stop

pounding!

“L-Look, this is the empress of an entire country we’re talking about!”

I shook my head so hard my hair got mussed up, but Myusel said, “But that’s exactly why... If Her Majesty were to be together with you, Shinichi-sama...”

“T-T-T-Together?! You mean like, m-m-*married*—?!”

Yet even as I said it, the words took on a strange savor of reality. I saw an image of a church, empty except for two people: me in a tuxedo, and Petralka wearing a wedding dress. Her short stature and girlish features made picturing her as a bride feel just a little funny, like seeing a child stand on their tiptoes—but there was no question the sumptuous white dress looked good on her. Holding a bouquet of flowers with both hands, she looked into my eyes and smiled...

“Nope, not happening!” I made a karate-chop motion through the empty space in front of me, quipping at my own ridiculous fantasy.

Myusel, though, seemingly unaware of my state of total confusion, was off in a world of her own, looking at the ground as she continued to talk. “Here I only want... to b-be by... by your side... but... if I were to marry... I wouldn’t even have that...”

“Come again?”

What exactly are you saying, Myusel-san?!

Her pale, pointy ears had gone as red as ripe strawberries, but I didn’t have the wherewithal to point it out. I was pretty sure I must look the same way. In fact, if we had a mirror, I probably could have seen my entire face, bright red. All I knew was that my cheeks were burning something fierce.

But even I, dim as I could be, understood what Myusel was saying. Petralka liked me. Therefore, she and I might get married. And if that happened, Myusel couldn’t marry me. But if Myusel married someone else, she couldn’t be with me. So she wouldn’t get married.

.....

Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!

J-Just hang on a second! What was with that harem trope-like—wait. Ahhh! This place had Middle Ages values—maybe harems were really legal (?) here?!

Wait, what? So, like, it could maybe really happen?! For serious?!

NO! No no no no no, wait...

“No way! Uh-uh! Again, not happening!” I shook my head for the umpteenth time, shook it as hard as I could. Actually, I had been shaking it a little too hard, and I was starting to feel sick. What was I doing here? “I told you, there’s no way someone in my position can marry an empress!”

“B-But...”

“I’m sure Petralka can’t just get married any old time she wants, either—and I’m sure she knows that!”

It was obvious. I thought. Probably. The more I thought about it, the less sure I was, but saying so was only going to make things that much harder, so I decided to stick to my guns.

Even if—purely hypothetically, now—even if Petralka and I were head over heels in love, and got married (just a thought experiment, remember), I didn’t believe for a second that Garius, Zahar, and all the important members of Petralka’s court would give their blessings to our union. I was just a commoner with no social status at all—worse than that, I was an outworlder who had once been a tool of invasion against the Eldant Empire. The very fact that I was basically free to do what I wanted here right now was nothing short of miraculous.

So a guy like that was going to marry the empress? The nation’s ministers would have to think Petralka had gone nuts. It would literally make me the absolute dictator of the Eldant Empire—and if I happened to have a single bad bone in my body, the Empire could find itself Japan’s vassal state overnight.

The thing was, I didn’t even really know if Petralka liked me as a man. As a friend, sure; I was pretty confident about that. But as more than that...?

“Yeah, no,” I said flatly. But even then, Myusel still looked anxious. Her face, clouded by sadness, looked so mournful, so delicate, and so simply beautiful that it tugged on my heartstrings harder than ever before.

Ahhhhhhhh...?!

G-Geeze, it's reactions like this that give a person the wrong idea! And just think of all the light novels where maids and their masters fall in love!

But at the same time...

Speaking of differences in status...

Part of me was coldly analyzing the situation: me and Myusel. Me and Petralka. Myusel and Petralka. Each of us had our own status, and our own situation.

Confronted with the empress, the absolute ruler, a commoner—even a commoner in love with her—had to make way when she came down the street. On the other hand, even if she were in love with him, madly, passionately, social status would form an impassable wall between the two of them. Love between a servant and her master was similar: status came between them, making a love between equals almost impossible. I had never given it much thought before, but it turned out to be a very thorny problem.

I felt like I had once heard it said that the love two people recognize between each other is romance; the love everyone else recognizes between them is marriage. But being in love and actually getting married were different things, even if they had a lot in common. Even I understood that much.

“Look, anyway, it's never going to happen,” I insisted, trying to close out the conversation.

“I... I see...” Myusel must have understood that I wanted to stop talking about this, because with the slightest hint of a pained smile, she bowed to me and rolled her cart out of the room.



What with this and that, we reached the next day. We went to Eldant Castle, just as Petralka had instructed us. Incidentally, the night before, we had contacted our students to let them know that school was canceled for the day. I knew about how long our morning reports would usually take, but a meeting with an ambassador? I was pretty sure we couldn't just say hello and goodbye, and I had no idea how long we might spend talking to them. We couldn't very

well put our classes ahead of a diplomatic meeting.

Eldant Castle was just as imposing as ever. Carved out of a mountain by the use of magic, it was staggeringly big. You could stand in front of the main gate and crane your neck as far back as it would go, and you could still barely see the whole thing. Even with magic involved, a construction project on this scale must have been an enormous undertaking. I'm sure it involved the equivalent of billions of yen to complete.

I didn't normally think too hard about it, but this was not a place a commoner like me typically got to just walk in and out of. Being reminded of the fact kind of gave me the shivers.

"What's the matter, Shinichi-san?" someone asked from just ahead of me. They were walking beside Minori-san, and looked back when I had stopped to peer up at the castle.

This person was Ayasaki Hikaru-san, one of Amutech's employees. In other words, one of my subordinates—strictly speaking, my assistant.

"Oh... Coming." I gave a noncommittal nod and followed after the others.

It's almost like Hikaru-san is more comfortable here than I am, I thought, looking at Hikaru-san walking ahead of me. Hikaru-san didn't seem the least bit intimidated by the castle, at least not that I could tell. In fact, this person moved through it as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Hikaru-san was technically a commoner, a regular Japanese person just like me, but refined manners and way of speaking somehow made my assistant seem more like the well-bred daughter of some noble family somewhere. And the outfit: frills everywhere, delicate embroidery, a Gothic Lolita thing that would look right at home in a noble mansion. Long, beautiful black hair caught the sunlight, making Hikaru-san look like a vision out of a dream, like a creature completely divorced from whatever I was.

It was completely perfect. Except for one thing: this princess, this picture of feminine elegance, was a guy. He—yes, *he*—was one of those *otoko-no-ko*. Not as in the Japanese word for "boy," but the one that uses the kanji for "daughter" and means "cross-dresser."

Anyway, never mind about that.

“Is it really all right for someone like me to be welcoming an ambassador...?” I asked. In this world, I was pretty sure—no, make that completely sure—that any ambassador would be of noble stature. Nobody would give a nameless commoner the job of representing an entire nation.

“Doesn’t matter, does it?” Minori-san said, smiling a little over her shoulder at me. “They asked you to come.”

“That’s true, but...” Today of all days, I wasn’t feeling my bravest. Maybe the last night’s conversation with Myusel was still on my mind.

I do remember telling Petralka once that we don’t have nobles and commoners in Japan. But that was a long time ago.

It was a little late for me to be worrying about status differences, I told myself as we walked along.

“...Ah.”

When we arrived at our usual hallway through the castle, three people were waiting for us. I recognized two of them; they were knights in the castle guard. I recognized the other guy, too, the one flanked by the knights, but he didn’t look anything like them. He wore a strangely threadbare-looking suit, an outfit that stuck out like a sore thumb in this Middle Ages-ish setting.

“Hullo.” Suit raised a hand in greeting and smiled genially.

Matoba Jinzaburou: in a word, my boss. But because he traveled so frequently between Japan and Eldant, he wasn’t really a resident of Amutech’s mansion. Actually, it seemed like a long time since I’d seen him.

With his gentle, never-changing smile, Matoba-san looked like the kind of person who wouldn’t hurt a fly. The quintessential middle manager, the kind you see wiping sweat off their brow with a handkerchief all the time. But his very generic-ness made him hard to read, and although he wasn’t an enemy, I hesitated to call him a friend. It was a complicated relationship. But basically, he was the Japanese government’s man, there to keep an eye on me and curb my tendency to come down on the side of the Eldant Empire. As a fellow member of Amutech, it made sense that he’d been summoned to meet the ambassador.

“Sorry,” I said, “are we late?”

“No, I’ve just arrived myself,” Matoba-san said, sounding as mellow as ever.

“We’ll show you in,” one of the knights said. Then one of them took up a position in front of us and the other followed behind as we started through the castle.

Finding the silence somehow uncomfortable, I said, “So, uh, what do you suppose this ambassador is like?”

“Yeah, we don’t know whether they’re a man or woman, young or old, or anything,” Minori-san chipped in.

“I asked Myusel about this other country—uhh, the Kingdom of Zwelberich, I think it was. I asked her what it was like there, and she said their magical technology is supposed to be way more advanced than Eldant’s.” Although personally, I thought Eldant magic was nothing to sneeze at. I couldn’t imagine what something “much more advanced” than this would look like. Myusel only seemed to know that the Kingdom’s magic was ahead of her own country’s; she couldn’t tell me what exactly that meant. “I guess discrimination against demi-humans is really severe there, though...”

Even in Eldant there was some bias against so-called “demi-humans”—elves, dwarves, and beast people. Half-elves like Myusel were especially looked down on, and I have to think it must have been pretty awful for her when she first got here. Petralka had even denounced Myusel once as a “half-breed,” if I recalled correctly.

Petralka and Myusel were pretty good friends now, and at school, elves and dwarves seemed to be treated much the same as the human students. In my personal bubble, discrimination seemed almost like nothing more than a word—but I’m sure that there was real anti-demi-human sentiment in places I couldn’t see. Thinking that’s been formed by centuries doesn’t get wiped out after a year or two, I figured. And apparently, discrimination against demi-humans in the Kingdom of Zwelberich was way worse than it was here in Eldant.

“She says they would never make an elf or a dwarf a minister like we do here,” I said. “Although she’s never been there, so she couldn’t tell me much more than that.”

The Eldant Empire bordered on being a meritocracy, and a small handful of demi-humans had risen to fairly high positions within the government. Yes, they were sort of exceptional, but apparently exceptions like that would never have been permitted in Zwelberich.

“Shinichi-kun...” Minori-san said warningly.

“I know,” I said. I understood what she was trying to say. “I’ll behave.”

I had occasionally been known to make a bit of a scene here in Eldant. I had spoken out against discrimination more than once to Petralka (Her Majesty the Empress, remember) as well as Garius (noble) and Zahar (the Prime Minister). They were kind enough to indulge me, but there were people who might not smile on that sort of thing—people who might take it as an affront, as me overstepping the boundaries of class. In fact, that was essentially what had gotten me captured by the Assembly of Patriots.

Basically, if I went around saying “Don’t discriminate! Bad, bad, bad!” to the wrong people, I might not walk away from the experience alive. Not that I meant to actively accept discrimination, but there was a time and a place to say certain things. At the moment, I was an honored guest of the Eldant Empire, and if I carelessly said something inflammatory, it might be equated with an act of ill will on the part of my hosts.

At length we spotted someone rounding a corner, and stopped.

“Garius-san.”

There was the long, silver hair; the composed features; a young man so beautiful he burned himself into your memory. His eyes, emerald like Petralka’s, flashed, sharp and perceptive. He looked like he had stepped straight out of the pages of some shoujo manga: which is to say, he was a total hunk. He was slim and regal, of course, but not gaunt; you could almost see the toned muscles moving under his clothes.

Ladies and gentlemen, Minister Garius en Cordobal: the guy with all the gifts, the realest of all the “damn Reals” I had ever met.

Despite all that, though, I honestly wasn’t what you would call jealous of him. Like Petralka, he lived a life constrained by class and station. And also, so the

very popular rumor went, he wasn't the type to be interested in girls. Although I had to admit I didn't know how true it was.

We all watched Garius: he was walking toward us quickly, but he wasn't looking at us. He hardly seemed to know we were there.

The two knights with us silently dropped their heads when Garius appeared. Normally, I would expect him to give them a salute or a nod, maybe say a brief word of greeting to us. But today evidently was not normal. Garius walked right past us without ever slowing down or even seeming to notice us. His face as he went by was far more stern than usual.

Everything wasn't right in the world of Garius. But what was going on?

"Uh, G-Garius-san?" I reflexively called after him. With a start, he halted and finally turned to us.

"Oh, Shinichi." He blinked, as if coming out of a trance. "Ah, yes... You were summoned today as well." He nodded to himself, but his tone of voice gave the distinct impression that his thoughts were elsewhere.

It was weird. Very out of character. Garius always seemed ready for anything; for as young as he was, he was very cool and collected. For him not to notice when he walked by people he knew, or to forget who had been scheduled to visit the castle, would ordinarily have been unthinkable.

Actually, Garius didn't just seem preoccupied—he looked like a cornered animal. When I looked closely, I could see dark bags under his eyes, like he hadn't been sleeping much.

"You tired?" I asked, and he looked pointedly away from me.

"Not at all..."

I knew for a fact I had never seen him look this way. He seemed unsettled, almost nervous or anxious... anyway, whatever it was, it certainly didn't suit Garius's almost disgustingly beautiful face.

"Gosh, I wonder what's the matter with Garius-san," Minori-san whispered into my ear.

"Yeah, I agree, something's wrong." If Minori-san thought so, too, then at

least I knew it wasn't my imagination or a simple mistake.

"He's restless and fidgety... like a maiden in the first blush of love!"

"A maiden in what?" Where did she come up with these expressions?

I unconsciously moved my eyes from Minori-san back to Garius. Now that she mentioned it, I had to admit, he didn't *not* look like... but there *had* to be better metaphors than that, right?

Garius probably didn't know what we were whispering about, but he gave a long, pathos-laden sigh that came dangerously close to supporting Minori-san's hypothesis. My bodyguard clenched her fist.

"Don't tell me—you're heartsick?!"

Curse this rotten WAC!

"Who is it?! Is it Shinichi-kun?! I can't believe you're only discovering your feelings for him *now!*"

"Your fantasies are showing, Minori-san," I interjected, in a voice so calm it shocked even me. Frankly, I kind of frightened myself with how accustomed I'd become to her rottenness. I could see it coming from a mile away and have a quip ready to go. Being used to it was one thing, but that felt like a slippery slope to thinking a fujoshi's thoughts, and then... *shiver*.

"I'm just a little on edge with the ambassador from Zwelberich coming," Garius said. His tone was a touch more forceful than necessary—I guess he had caught the joy in Minori-san's voice, too. "The meeting is scheduled to begin soon."

"Oh, yeah." I guess Garius would have a lot on his plate with a foreign ambassador arriving. I felt a little bad about stopping him. "Sorry. I know you must be busy."

"Think nothing of it..." He gave an ambiguous shake of his head.

Hmmm. Something was definitely strange here.

"I guess we'll get going, then," I said.

"Yes, do," Garius replied with a nod—but then, to my surprise, he added in a

whisper, “Having you and your companions here heartens me, Shinichi.”

“Huh...?” I stopped in my tracks and looked back at him.

This was completely bizarre. Garius never *needed* to feel “heartened.”

Then he seemed to realize what he had said, and shook his head again. He waved a hand as if to say, “Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s nothing,” he added. And then he walked away, still obviously hurrying. We watched him go for a long second, then started off ourselves.

“There’s something really weird about him today,” I said. “I’ve never seen him like that.”

“He said it himself,” Hikaru-san said. “He’s nervous about the ambassador.”

“I wonder if that’s all it is...”

I didn’t know how big or important the Kingdom of Zwelberich was, but I couldn’t imagine something that could put even the knight Garius off his stride. When he had been meeting us (sort of the ambassadors from Japan), he had been completely cool, and even when the Japanese government had sent a special-forces unit to kill me, he had seemed totally in control. The way he was acting seemed less like anxiety and more like...

“Love changes people,” Minori-san opined from beside me, sounding like a young girl stuck in a daydream. Although I assumed the daydream she was having was rated R.

“Would you let it go already?”

“Maybe it’s not Shinichi-san he’s in love with. Maybe it’s this ambassador!” Hikaru-san said. Couldn’t he ever leave well enough alone? “Happens all the time, right? One look, and a person falls head over heels. Or maybe it’s a reunion with a long-lost first love...”

“Yeah, you’re right!” Minori-san said, nodding enthusiastically. “That would make perfect sense!”

“I’ll get you a dictionary and you can look up the definition of *perfect sense*.”

“So that’s why he was gazing at Shinichi-kun,” Minori-san said, completely

ignoring my interjection. “He’s going to be reunited with his first love. Yet now he’s in love with Shinichi-kun. The heart of the beautiful knight, Garius, wavers between two men...!”

“That’s all complete speculation,” I said, hoping to burst the rotten bubble before it got any bigger. I wished Hikaru-san would stop pouring fuel on these fires. I knew it wasn’t because he liked BL himself; he just liked seeing the subject of Minori-san’s little fantasies (namely me) squirm. “I’d much rather be popular with girls than guys.”

“Minori-san, listen to his cute little dreams,” Hikaru-san said with a smile, continuing to pour poison in the WAC’s ear.

“It’s a sin to be so dense,” Minori-san replied.

“A crime.”

They were nodding constantly at each other. Even Matoba-san had turned around, arms crossed, and joined the nod-fest.

I wanted to ask what was wrong with all of them, but even I wasn’t that stupid: after yesterday, I had an inkling what they were talking about. Seriously, though, the idea that Petralka was in love with me was just Myusel’s mistaken impression—and as for Myusel herself, there was a good chance she just *thought* she was in love with me because she was glad that I treated her well.

Not to brag, but I don’t have a single personal quality that could possibly cause anyone to fall in love with me. Objectively speaking, I’m just a totally hopeless otaku, nothing more and nothing less. Totally average looks and abilities—or maybe below average. The type to thoughtlessly form a huge crush on a girl just because she’s nice to me (and even worse, to tell her about it).

I never wanted to feel that crushing, suffocating, wish-I-could-jump-in-a-hole-and-disappear sense of humiliation ever again.

“Ugh, a man who doesn’t know the first thing about a woman’s heart is the most terrible thing, isn’t he?” Hikaru-san said, looking at me with what might have been disgust.

“It’s okay,” Minori-san replied with a smile. “As long as he understands men’s hearts instead!”

Hey! That doesn't make any sense!

“Fair enough. Ever thought about switching sides, Shinichi-san?”

“I told you, no way!” I said, shaking my head vigorously to drive the point home.

And then there we were, standing before the door to the audience chamber.



As I've explained before, there's more than one audience chamber in Eldant Castle. We normally went to the smaller one to make our morning reports to Petralka, but the very first time I had arrived in the castle, I had been shown into the bigger one.

For the meeting with the ambassador from the Kingdom of Zwelberich, they had naturally chosen the larger room. Big enough for Eldant's ministers, knights, and other courtiers to attend, the room was sumptuous, as befitted a chamber for the reception of foreign dignitaries. Sumptuous and, let it be said, imposing, showing any visitors just how rich and powerful the Empire was.

A knight announced us as we entered the room: “Amutech General Manager Kanou Shinichi-sama, Ayasaki Hikaru-sama, and their cohorts Matoba Jinzaburou-sama and Koganuma Minori-sama have arrived!”

The enormous door opened with a portentous creak. The first thing I saw was the red carpet laid straight down the center of the room. The royal guard stood at attention on either side, and farther along, it was lined by about a dozen ministers as well. And at the tail end, at the very far side of the room, was the throne, sitting up a step higher than everything else around. The ornately decorated seat was currently filled, of course, by Petralka.

“Mm. We are glad you're here.”

The throne was designed to be impressively large (who would pay any attention to a tiny throne?), but it looked even bigger with the physically petite Petralka sitting in it. She looked like she belonged there, though; today she was absolutely projecting her authority as Empress. Standing to either side of her were Prime Minister Zahar and Garius, who must have circled around and beat

us there using some other entrance.

“Welcome, Shinichi-dono, and all of you. How kind of you to attend on such short notice,” Zahar said, smiling broadly. To me, he looked perfectly normal, not obviously anxious about this occasion. Prime Minister Zahar was a friendly-looking man with white hair and a white beard—but he had his hand on the rudder of the nation’s political course, or so it was said. Prime Ministers in stories always turn out to be villains, taking the ear of the ruler to put their evil plots into motion. Zahar, though, appeared to break the mold. He seemed like a grandfatherly figure to Petralka, genuinely interested in looking after her and helping her grow up to be a better empress.

In any event...

I bowed to Petralka and her entourage, but then said hesitantly, “Are they sure about having us here?”

I didn’t necessarily mean here, in the audience chamber—I meant that the knights had led us almost to the far end of the room. Except for the important advisors, we were among the closest to the throne. Maybe it had been discussed in advance, because none of the other attendees showed obvious displeasure about it. I was glad to be somewhere I could see Petralka’s face clearly, but it would probably put me right up close to the Zewelberichian ambassador, too.

“Well, this was where they put us, and I guess the ambassador’s likely to call on us right away,” Minori-san whispered to me. “So why worry?”

Sometimes Minori-san sure could be—what should I call it? Bold? Optimistic? Startlingly nonchalant? I still wondered if this was really a good idea.

“What’s important is, just try not to screw anything up,” she added.

“I won’t!”

“If the ambassador turns out to be a little girl, no exclaiming ‘IS THAT **REALLY** AN ARCHETYPAL LITTLE GIRL CHARACTER?!’, okay?”

“Geez, I’m never going to live that down, am I?” I swear I understood by now that it had been a mistake.

I looked in the direction of the subject of my long-ago faux pas—namely, Petralka herself—and our eyes met. Just for a second, her cheeks flushed, more like an ordinary young woman than an empress. Maybe, in spite of how good she was at hiding it, she really was a little nervous.

And then the knight's voice boomed through the chamber again. "The Sixth Prince of Zwelberich, the honorable Rubert Wollyn, has arrived!"

His voice faded away, leaving a deafening silence.

The ministers began to look toward the entrance, and we followed their gazes. Come to think of it, I had been in the castle's audience chambers many times, but always as the guest, never as the host, if you will. Some knights approached the huge door and began to slide it open again—it looked massive and powerful, like the wall itself was moving.

A figure could be seen as the door opened...

"Is that him?" someone muttered.

A young man stepped into the audience chamber. His clothes had puffy sleeves and legs, an elegant outfit that practically screamed, "Hey! I'm a prince!" He came walking down the red carpet with an assured stride. The dark stripes on his outfit made the gold buttons and other ornaments on his chest and shoulders stand out; they glinted in the light each time he moved.

So this was our ambassador—Prince Rubert. I took him to be about the same age as Garius, or maybe a little older. He had clean, handsome features, and his radiant golden hair was kept a little shorter than Garius's silver locks. His lips were graced with a quiet smile—he was the very picture of elegance.

I watched him as he approached the throne... and suddenly our eyes met. Realizing that it might be impolite if I seemed to be staring at the prince, I reflexively looked down, but I thought I saw Rubert's smile widen almost imperceptibly. I sort of felt like if you looked in the dictionary under *nice guy*, you might find his picture. Or under *prince*, for that matter. I found myself wondering whether a commoner like me should even be breathing the same air as him, among other somewhat self-hateful things.



“I’ve been remiss in not calling on you sooner, Empress Petralka,” Prince Rubert said, stopping in front of the throne and kneeling. Several people behind him—I had hardly noticed them, but they must have been his attendants—likewise knelt, moving in perfect unison. The prince might have been older, but as Empress Petralka commanded the higher station, hence this show of deference.

“Raise your head, Prince Rubert,” Petralka said with great gravity. “It has indeed been some time. Is all well with you?”

“As ever. But I see Your Majesty has grown even more beautiful since we last met.”

“You may dispense with the flattery,” Petralka said with a wry smile.

“Then I will dispense with little, for I speak from the heart.”

Rubert’s finely-formed lips spoke words that would have gotten a normal guy a “Huh? What’s this BS?” reaction. But coming from a guy who could give Garius a run for his money when it came to sheer good looks, somehow they didn’t feel out of place. It was startling—in fact, kind of incredible.

Next, Rubert turned to Zahar. “It gladdens my heart to see you well, Elder Zahar.”

“I see you haven’t changed, my Prince,” Zahar replied with amusement.

It was obvious that Prince Rubert knew them. I guess that made sense, considering that they were each among the rulers of the respective countries.

Just one thing surprised me...

“...Been a while.”

Huh?

Toward Garius, and no one else, Rubert sounded different—unless I was just mishearing things. There wasn’t any obsequious deference, not even any real politeness, just three short words. Yet the emotion in them was impossible to miss; it wasn’t brusqueness so much as... a friendly familiarity, maybe...?

“Indeed...” Garius didn’t return Prince Rubert’s smile; in fact, his response

seemed to be deliberately ambiguous. He didn't even seem to want to look the prince in the eye. Someone Garius didn't want to make eye contact with? Who was this person? If I looked very closely, I thought I could detect the slightest flush in Garius's pale cheeks—in that regard, he really was a lot like Petralka. Could it be he was... angry? Or...

"I have come here to reaffirm the continued friendship between my Kingdom of Zwelberich and the Holy Eldant Empire, and to..."

While I stood there trying to put the pieces together in my mind, Prince Rubert launched into his ambassador's spiel, and the discussion moved on to the state of affairs in each nation, the details of the alliance, and other topics. Honestly, political talk like this went straight over my head, so I just sort of let it go in one ear and out the other.

There's something seriously weird going on with Garius, though...

He was forcing himself to appear composed, but to those of us who knew him, it was obvious how unsettled he was. He would stare straight at Prince Rubert, but when it seemed like their eyes might meet, he would hurriedly look away. His left hand would clench as if fighting to control some emotion, then suddenly relax.

As for Prince Rubert, he was mostly talking to Petralka, but could be seen to glance at Garius every once in a while. If their eyes happened to meet, his smile would deepen. But when Garius looked away, it seemed to amuse him even more.

What was going on here? Seriously, what was the deal?! I didn't know the answer, but the hairs on the back of my neck were standing up. Desperate to communicate how I was feeling, I turned to the person beside me...

"...right?"

...and discovered that Minori-san's lips were moving discreetly. "Hm...?"

"Yes, I know. I understand how you feel."

"Minori...san?"

"Wh-What do you mean by that?' 'I've longed to see you.' 'F-Foolishness. It's

much too late...”

“Hello? Earth to Minori-san?”

“‘Too late? You wound me.’ ‘Then why did you abandon me all those years ago?’ ‘That was a misunderstanding.’”

Minori-san continued looking at the ground and muttering to herself. She didn’t sound normal, either. She was putting on some kind of voice, unusually low, and she changed her precise tone from line to line, like one person playing two parts. It was like she was... what was the word... doing ADR?

Okay, so there wasn’t really any dialogue to dub over, and she wasn’t recording anything anyway, but forget about that. I was blown away to realize...

“‘I want to set that misunderstanding straight. Tonight, in my room...’”

Was she improvising a BL script involving Garius and Prince Rubert?! Talk about a one-track BL mind! But... wait. I had to admit that when I listened to her dialogue, it went a long way towards explaining the weird vibe between the two of them. Her ability to come up with a BL conversation on the spot and immediately act it out, though... that was the fearsome power of Koganuma Minori..... No, not the time!

“Koganuma-kun?” I could see Matoba-san raising an eyebrow, as perplexed by Minori-san’s behavior as I was.

“Hoo... Ooh hoo hoo hoo hoo...”

The bad feeling I had about this kept getting worse and worse, and now it was accompanied by a sense of déjà vu. Minori-san’s eyes went seemingly vacant behind her spectacles, then they flashed dangerously.

“IS THAT **REALLY** A BL—”

“Hrk!”

The rotten WAC thrust her fists into the air, howling, but two hands immediately slapped themselves over her mouth from either side.

He didn’t say anything.

I didn’t say anything.

Matoba-san and I looked at each other from either side of the erupting Minori-san and nodded. For the first time, I sort of felt like the two of us were completely in tune... Okay, not the time for that either!

“Hm? Something the matter?” Prince Rubert turned as he noticed the two of us trying to suppress Minori-san.

This was bad. Of *course* we were going to stand out when we both suddenly slapped our hands over her mouth. Even Petralka and the others were goggling at us.

“Oh! Well, uh...” I sent my brain into overdrive, hoping to come up with an excuse. “This woman is, uh, she’s sick!”

“Well, well... Is she going to be all right?” the prince asked considerately. “She needn’t strain herself here. We can summon a doctor...”

“N-No need! She’ll be fine in a few minutes! She just has these little attacks!”

Yikes... this prince seemed like about the nicest guy in the world! No way could I confess that Minori-san had been secretly making up a BL conversation between him and Garius!

“I see old fondness has made my greetings overlong,” Prince Rubert said, turning back to Petralka and the others. “And when an ill person was waiting on me—my sincere apologies.”

“No, really, think nothing of it,” I said emphatically. Now Hikaru-san was helping us to restrain Minori-san, too; I felt like we were the ones who should be sincerely sorry.

Still, how I felt was one thing, how I had to act was another. With regrets to Prince Rubert, I wanted this audience to be over, and quickly. Minori-san looked like she might actually explode if things went on much longer. Having these two handsome men, Rubert and Garius, right next to her was physically dangerous.

But then Rubert said, “I do, though, have one last thing to mention.” He didn’t seem to notice how panicked I was, or at least he acted like he didn’t. “I’m afraid I didn’t come here simply to exchange pleasantries. I have an important request to make.”

"Have you?" Petralka replied. "Tell us; you needn't hesitate."

At that, the Sixth Prince of Zwelberich stood up straight as a post and still as a statue and looked directly at Petralka.

“I, Rubert Wollin, the Sixth Prince of Zwelberich—” His voice was clear and carrying; it almost sounded like he was singing. “—do address myself to the Holy Eldant Empire, bosom friend of my nation, and its empress, Petralka an Eldant III, worthy of all love and respect: to her I humbly propose marriage.”

The last echoes of his voice faded away in the suddenly silent audience chamber.

.....

.....

.....Huh?

It took me a moment to grasp what he had said. And I wasn't the only one.

“.....Huh?” On the throne, Petralka was blinking in amazement.

[illegible]

The audience chamber filled with my confused cry and the murmuring of every minister, counselor, and VIP in the room.

Chapter Two: When G-----s Met Rubert

“Her Majesty—married?” Myusel’s eyes were round as saucers.

It was about half a day after Prince Rubert’s stunning proposal of marriage. We’d said goodbye to Matoba-san, who claimed he had to go to the JSDF garrison to report to the Japanese government. The rest of us came back to the mansion.

We had gone to the castle with the intention of giving Prince Rubert Amutech’s formal greetings, but things at the royal residence were in no shape for that now, and we had withdrawn for the time being. The fact that deciding to do that—and getting permission for it—took a full eight hours told you just how crazy things were in the Eldant government right now.

Our dinner was some food Myusel prepared in a big hurry. I had told her we would presumably be dining at a banquet at the castle this evening, so we wouldn’t need dinner; I felt a little bad about suddenly dropping in with a party of hungry employees. Before long, though, Myusel had produced a meal using whatever was on hand, but which still tasted just as good as ever. It was one of the many things I found amazing about her—but, er, forget about that for now.

“I don’t know,” I said to Myusel, whose face seemed to have frozen into a permanent expression of shock. “She didn’t answer right away or anything. It doesn’t look like the Eldant government was expecting this any more than we were...”

“I see... No, I suppose they wouldn’t.” Myusel nodded, sounding like she was talking to herself as much as to me.

“Honestly, proposal or no proposal, I can hardly picture Petralka getting married...” Well, wait. That wasn’t really true, was it? Why, just yesterday, I had been fantasizing about Petralka and me standing at the altar. But still, the idea that she might *actually* get married felt a little unreal.

“I disagree,” Hikaru-san said, elegantly sipping some soup. “If anything, I would say it’s incredible that the subject hadn’t come up already.”

“Y-You think so?”

“Her Majesty is seventeen, right? Very much a grown woman. I’ve heard it said that in Japan’s Heian Era, girls as young as thirteen were considered ready to be married.”

“Yeah, I know. But that was a thousand years ago.”

“True. But consider the cultural level: the Eldant Empire isn’t that far from the Heian Era, or maybe the Kamakura?”

“Well...”

He was right. People want various different things out of marriage, but when the goal was purely to produce a child who would carry on the family lineage to the next generation, then any girl who could get pregnant was ready to get married. It was really only in the modern era that we had come to think of eighteen or twenty years old as the line between being a child and being an adult—it was an idea with precious little history yet. You could even say that seventeen was the prime of the marrying years.

“I’m telling you,” Hikaru-san insisted, “I can hardly believe Her Majesty hasn’t been betrothed already at this point in her life.”

“I really wonder...”

“Still, when you’re an empress, you have to find a spouse of suitable status. He may be the prince of another nation, but at least he’s a prince; there shouldn’t be any objection there. Prime Minister Zahar told us this sort of thing wasn’t unusual, remember?”

“Well...”

“The prime minister said that?” Myusel cocked her head, curious, as if she couldn’t quite follow what we were saying. It was like she didn’t know why Prime Minister Zahar’s name should come up in discussing Petralka’s marriage.

“So, uh,” I said, trying to put it briefly. According to Prime Minister Zahar, the Eldant Empire and the Kingdom of Zwelberich had been engaged with each other for generations, and in that time several members of the respective imperial and royal families had intermarried. It was easy enough to imagine that

this had a partly political purpose: it helped solidify the alliance. Or, if you were feeling less charitable, provide hostages... and when it came to having hostages, it needed to be someone important, like an empress or a prince of the blood.

From that particular perspective, it was impossible to ask anything more from Prince Rubert as a match for Petralka. Being the sixth prince of his country, he didn't stand much chance of inheriting the throne—but he was still a direct descendent of the current king, and as such an appropriate partner for her. All of this combined meant Rubert's proposal shouldn't have been especially surprising. What seemed to shock the Eldant court more than anything wasn't the proposal; it was the simple fact that there had been no warning, no feelers sent out. Rubert had simply shown up and asked.

"Of course, none of that means Zahar necessarily agrees with the marriage," I said.

"Is... Is that so..." Myusel said, casting her eyes on the ground as if deep in thought.

"Not to mention... we have no idea what *Petralka* thinks about it yet," I added with a pained smile.

It had been only just yesterday that Myusel had been telling me Petralka was in love with me—though to be fair, I had yet to hear it from the proverbial horse's mouth. With or without me, though, if Petralka had been seriously thinking about marriage, that would have made it even stranger that the subject had never come up before. My guess was it wasn't a thought she had really considered. All the more reason she would be taken aback by Prince Rubert's offer. I had to assume she had a lot on her mind right now.

Of course, if Petralka really loved Prince Rubert, that would be great, right? It seemed like they knew each other from way back, plus he was handsome and seemed nice—Petralka had every reason to want to marry him. And yet... in all this time, I had never heard her so much as mention Rubert's name. So while she might feel friendly toward him, I thought it was fair to say that she wasn't in love with him.

Anyway, it all just seemed so sudden.

"When you get married..." I said, "I mean, you're supposed to marry someone

you really love, right? Right, Brooke, Cerise-san?”

“Er?” The two people I had named had obviously not expected to be part of this conversation. They had been quietly eating their dinners; now they both raised their long heads in surprise.

Brooke and Cerise Darwin: this husband-and-wife pair were not human. They belonged to a group of people called lizardmen, and the way they looked—and the way they lived—were noticeably distinct from humans. To put it bluntly, they looked like walking lizards. They had tough hides, no hair, and their body temperature was highly influenced by the environment. That is, they were reptiles.

They worked here at the mansion: Brooke was our gardener, and Cerise-san was a maid, like Myusel. They both had colorful life stories, and while they had been separated for a while, now they were living happily together.

At the moment, though, neither of them was saying anything. They just looked at each other, almost like they were confused by what I had said.

“Master, we—”

“When we became spouses, it was by th’ order of our chief.”

“Huh?”

It was? So what they wanted had had nothing to do with it? Come to think of it, they *had* mentioned something about this before. Brooke had been a big hero of the lizardman people, and Cerise-san was the daughter of a powerful member of the Tribal Council. They had known each other and been close for some time, so they had no reason to object—but their marriage was still a strategic one.

“Course... ’tweren’t, ahem, as though I were against the match...”

“Me, either... In fact, I was very happy when it was decided.”

The two of them looked at each other.

“.....Cerise.”

“.....Brooke.”

Ooooooooookay.

It could be hard to read lizardman faces, but it was pretty obvious this was—you know. Them gazing adoringly into each other's eyes, or whatever. Totally smitten. Head over heels. Falling in love all over again. *Arrrrgh! Just explode, you damn Reals!*

"If even the two of you had an arranged marriage," Hikaru-san said with a bit of a smirk, dragging us back on topic, "then there's no way the empress gets to marry for love. As Shinichi-san might put it—" (and here he pretended to imitate my voice) "*—you see it all the time in manga and light novels.*"

"Okay, true, but..."

Marriages among nobles were often political, dictated by circumstances—at least as far as I could tell. Hikaru-san was right, most of my knowledge of the subject came from manga and novels and stuff; it wasn't like I was a scholar of this sort of thing. But it seemed pretty plausible. So I was aware of the reality. And yet...

"Unfortunately," Hikaru-san said, "this isn't an issue we can do anything about by talking about it."

"Yeah, well, I mean, you're right, but... you know?"

"It's hard to let go of, isn't it?" Hikaru-san smiled, not quite nicely. "Don't know what you have till you've lost it, eh?"

"I haven't lost anything! That's not what we're talking about, right?!"

Besides, Petralka and Rubert's marriage wasn't even settled yet! I-I-I was so not shaken by this! Not moved! Not upset! *Agh, Myusel, don't you give me that anxious look, too!*

"Anyway, what matters is, we can't change anything by talking about it, and you're right about that! Yep!" I was very eager to be done with this conversation. I was just about to force myself to start eating again when I noticed something. "Elvia...?"

The girl sitting across from me wasn't moving. Elvia Harneiman was part of a beast person tribe, a werewolf. She used to be a spy, sent here by the

neighboring country of Bahairam, but now she was the mansion's resident artist. (Yet another long story.) Just like you might expect from a "werewolf," she had animal ears on her head and a fuzzy tail growing out of her behind.

The hair on her head, the same brown color as her ears and tail, didn't quite reach her shoulders (a good length for keeping it out of the way), and her body was lean and taut. She was obviously the active type. She wore a sort of tube top that showed a lot of skin, including her midriff, but it wasn't so much erotic as it contributed to the impression of energy. It was probably linked to the fact that, for better or for worse, she was a very open person.

As a beast person, Elvia had exceptional physical abilities, which also meant she ate a lot of food to fuel herself. I didn't know where she put it all in that compact body, but seeing her pack dinner away was a common sight at our table. And now she wasn't eating. Very unusual.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"Er, is somethin' the matter with Minori-sama?" There was a hint of hesitation—in fact, maybe fear—in Elvia's voice.

We all followed her gaze to discover (as you might guess) Minori-san. She had her spoon in her right hand, her fork in her left, and was holding them up in front of her face. Okay, nothing too weird about that—but the way she was moving was very strange. Whatever she was doing with her utensils, it obviously wasn't eating dinner.

"No, stop, Fork!" she said. *"I already have my heart set on Knife!"* *"Him? He can never do anything but hurt you. Pick me instead. I'll stab you right through the heart."* Minori-san, muttering to herself, clanged her fork and her spoon together. *"I... I can't do it?! Is your heart really that hard...?!"* Hoo hoo... hoo hoo hoo hoo hoo!" The edges of Minori-san's lips turned up, and she laughed to herself.

I could see her eyes behind her glasses. They should have been looking at her spoon and fork, but instead they were unfocused, staring off into the distance somewhere. It was very, very scary. No wonder Elvia had sounded concerned.

"...You can just ignore her, Elvia."

“Y-Yeah, but...”

“She’s been this way all day.”

“G-Gee, really?”

“Too much stimulation this morning. She hasn’t managed to come back to reality yet...”

I guess after seeing two BL protagonists basically in the flesh, she hadn’t been able to restrain the fantasies. Minori-san was normally very good at not getting carried away when it wasn’t appropriate—but maybe having such a strong breaking point meant that when she finally cracked, it was hard to come back.

“Ooh hoo. Ooh hoo hoo hoo. Hoo hoo hoo hoo hoo!” Minori-san’s unsettling laughter continued. Myusel, Elvia, Brooke, and Cerise all looked at each other uneasily. Incidentally, Hikaru-san and I, having spent not just the carriage ride home with Minori-san but the entire time we had been waiting at the castle, were already used to it. I figured if we left her alone, the fantasy would run its course and she would come back around eventually. For the time being, I intended to treat Minori-san and her rotten internal world as if they didn’t exist, and I urged Elvia to do the same.

“Oh...” At that exact moment, Myusel looked up and blinked. “It looks like we have a visitor.”

“Huh?”

“I heard a knock at the door just now. I’ll go see who it is.” She stood up and pattered out of the kitchen.

“Did you hear anything?” I asked.

“Don’t think so...” Hikaru-san said.

Then again, Myusel was a half-elf, so her sense of hearing was sharper than ours. She went out of her way not to call attention to her pointy ears, so I just didn’t think about them much. Elvia had unusually sharp senses, too, but especially vision and smell—not so much hearing. Maybe it was because of how her ears flopped over?

In any event, Myusel could hear things that us humans—and even people like

Elvia and Brooke—couldn't. Sounds that were too small or too soft for us to pick up. It was easy to overlook, but it was actually a pretty incredible ability.

"But who would be visiting at this hour?" I said.

"No idea..." Hikaru-san shook his head. Naturally, I guess. If I couldn't imagine who it might be, after living here so much longer than him, then he certainly wouldn't know. I had more acquaintances in Eldant that might drop by, too...

Myusel was back quickly. "Um, Shinichi-sama..." She stopped in the dining room doorway, calling to me with some hesitation. Apologetic about interrupting my meal, I guessed.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"Er..." She was clearly distressed. I was in the middle of eating, and this person hadn't said they were coming, so she didn't know whether to show them in.

The visitor, though, ultimately solved this problem, because they apparently didn't care what I was doing.

"Shinichi-sensei!" a familiar voice shouted, and then two people shoved their way around Myusel.

"Huh—Loek? And Romilda?!" I was taken aback by the two faces I saw peering into the dining room. One tall young man, one short young woman. The boy had long golden hair and composed features—he was an elf, Loek Slayson. The girl had her red hair pulled into a braid on either side: the adorable dwarf, Romilda Guld. Both were students at the school Amutech ran—pupils of mine. Loek was a son of the nobility; his father was in the government. And Romilda was the daughter of the dwarf who ran the Guld Workshop, which handled jobs for the Eldant government. So although they were both demi-humans, they had comparatively high social status. Princlings (or princesslings?), if you will.

In most fantasy worlds, elves and dwarves don't get along very well—and while these two had started out that way, it seemed like they had gotten closer recently. But still—what were they doing here? And so late?

"What the heck's going on?" I got out of my chair and went over to them.

I was startled, though, when hands reached around Myusel—one from between Loek and Myusel, the other between her and Romilda—and took my hands.

Wh-What the heck?!

I realized that Myusel's anxiousness earlier hadn't been just because Loek and Romilda had shown up—it had been more about the owners of these hands.

"Shinichi-dono!"

Two more figures shoved their way between Loek and Romilda, on either side of Myusel—another elf and dwarf. What's more, the elf was a dead ringer for Loek. The dwarf was a middle-aged man with a beard.

"Huh? Er..." When I took a good look, I could see two *more* people still behind Myusel. Women, another elf and dwarf. The dwarf happened to look a lot like Romilda. So these must be...

"My mother and father," Loek said.

"My mom and dad," said Romilda.

"I'm Eric Slayson," the dwarf said. "And this is my wife, Agnes."

"Rydel Guld, at your service. And my wife, Lorna."

That's right, I realized, I knew these people. They were Loek's and Romilda's parents. I had seen both men in the audience chamber at gatherings of important Eldant officials.

"I appreciate you trying to get some learning into my son's thick skull."

"Yes, and I know how hard my daughter can be to handle. Thank you for all your hard work."

They both greeted me in about the same way, and I could see their wives bowing to me as well.

"Oh, no, it's been a pleasure..." Loek and Romilda had actually come to save me when I had been kidnapped by Bahairam, and the various craftspeople at the Guld workshop had worked hard to create Petralka's body double. "But why are you here? And all together..."

That was when I realized: Loek and Romilda were just there as guides. It was really their parents who wanted to talk to me. Unlike the kids, the faces of the four adults were all serious.

“Hey, what’s up?” Minori-san, apparently brought back to herself by the obviously grim nature of the meeting, came over to me.

Eric and Rydel looked at me and Minori-san, then looked at each other. They nodded, and then Eric said, “Shinichi-dono, we wish to speak to you. Or more precisely... to ask a favor.”



The adults’ story was this: among the ministers of the Eldant Empire, there were two main factions, followers of the First Imperial Prince and followers of the Second. Of course, the current ruler, Petralka, had no children; these titles referred to the previous generation—that is, the parents of Petralka and Garius, respectively. The factions originated in the time of the previous Emperor—namely, Petralka’s grandfather—but they had persisted unchanged until now.

These factions each supported their own candidate for the throne, conducting a covert struggle for power. This struggle had led to the standard bearers for each of the factions—Petralka’s and Garius’s parents—being poisoned, and instead of any of them taking the throne, all of them wound up dead.

The emperor had been, let’s say, less than pleased with the factionalists’ behavior, and he told them so. The infighting subsided, and they reached a sort of compromise in which Petralka would rule and Garius would be her aide, or rather her regent. This was in part, by the way, because Petralka was the daughter of the First Imperial Prince, who had after all been first in line for the succession. What’s more, it would have seemed almost impossibly strange for Garius to rule and the younger Petralka to be his regent. So this was how it had turned out. The factions had never really disappeared, but they had achieved a sort of balance, encouraged in part by the good relationship between Petralka and Garius.

“But now, that balance is being threatened,” Eric-san told me gravely. We had moved from the dining area into the living room, where I sat on one sofa and my menagerie of visitors—Loek, Romilda, and their folks—sat on the other. You

might wonder why Loek and Romilda, who seemed like nothing more than guides, were still there, but apparently they served as a sort of buffer between their parents. Remember what I said about elves and dwarves not getting along? I guess it wasn't a pure hatred thing so much as it was personalities that tended to rub each other the wrong way. But anyhow...

"Threatened?" I asked. I guess he meant that it looked like more fighting might disrupt the accord.

As I've said, the Slaysons and the Gulds were both important families in the Eldant aristocracy. Eric-san was more of what we might consider a foreign diplomat, while Rydel-san was involved with construction and building, but both of them apparently came down on Garius's side.

"But wouldn't that do more harm than good?"

I didn't really see Petralka and Garius suddenly going after each other's lives, but a little behind-the-scenes work by unscrupulous people around them could leave them cornered in a situation they had no control over. An absolute monarch Petralka might have been, but that didn't mean she could neglect relations with her ministers.

"Yes, this is a very dangerous situation," Eric-san said with a nod. "Civil war might be the best we could hope for. But if other countries then got wind of it, they would fall on us like jackals."

"Oh, no..." Suddenly I pictured a long shadow falling over the Holy Eldant Empire, threatening crisis. Whoever or whatever it was, I felt a profound revulsion for it. I owed so much to so many people here—Petralka, of course, but Garius too, and everyone in this nation who had accepted me. They were friends and acquaintances that I cherished. If someone was sneaking in the shadows, preparing to do them harm...

"I am pleased to say, though, that there is someone in our nation now who can avert this disaster," Eric-san said.

"Very true—one and one only," Rydel-san agreed, his expression grim.

Someone who could save the Eldant Empire from crisis? Who was it, some kind of superhero?

“Who is it?” I asked.

“Why, it’s you.”

.....

.....

.....*Excuse me?*

“Kanou Shinichi-dono,” Rydel-san said, “you are the only one who can save the Empire from catastrophe.”

Of all the things I had expected him to say, that was at the bottom of the list. My thoughts practically froze in my brain. “Um, what? Me? You mean *you*, like, *me*, right?” I looked from one face to the next for some kind of lifeline, but all of them—the parents, Loek, Romilda—simply nodded.

What the heck? How can I possibly be the one to—?

“Minori-san...” I looked at my bodyguard, at the end of my rope, but she was looking at the kids’ parents with an expression of disbelief. I guess she didn’t understand this any better than I did.

“Ahem, let me apologize for not being clearer,” Eric-san said. “Her Majesty... If you’ll forgive my bluntness, she’s rather fond of you, Shinichi-dono.”

I didn’t speak. I mean, he wasn’t wrong. At the very least, she certainly didn’t *dislike* me. Even if I wasn’t sure about all that love stuff Myusel had talked about...

“And His Highness Garius feels much the same way about you.”

“Umm...”

Well, he wasn’t wrong about that, either. Garius talked to me like a normal person, even shared some personal stuff with me. It had even been Garius who had first told me about his and Petralka’s parents—even though the story seemed to cause him a certain amount of shame. But what he felt for me was ultimately friendship. That’s an important point. It was absolutely— “You are so right about that!” a voice exclaimed. Naturally, it wasn’t mine. “Garius-san is completely crazy about Shinichi-kun!”

You there, the rotten WAC! Don't make this any more complicated than it already is!!

"This goes beyond *suki* into pure *ai shiteru* territory! I'm sure he's looking for any excuse to cross that final line!"

"That's a complete fantasy! *Your* fantasy!"

"Aww, c'mon! You don't have to be so shy, Shinichi-kun!" Minori-san exclaimed, her eyes shining—no, *glinting*. Ugh, just when I thought she had come back to reality, that perverse switch got flipped again, and off she went... "It's obvious to everyone that it's lovey-dovey love love love!" She put her hands on her cheeks, practically squirming with joy. She was starting to seem like a fundamentally different person...

"Ahem..." The parents had watched this truly strange display of excitement with no small amount of bemusement. In fact, they seemed to be trying to pull away a little. An understandable reaction the first time you saw something like this. As for Romilda, who had encountered this behavior before, she was just watching with a wry smile; Loek watched this madness unfold raptly.

Are you sure, Loek? Is this what you want?

"I'm sorry, I—" With Minori-san here, it didn't look like we were going to get a lot of talking done, at least not about anything practical. I was looking around for help when: "Oh." I thought I glimpsed a tuft of tail fur by the doorway.

Evidently, *somebody* thought she was hiding in the shadows, watching us covertly. But she had only hidden half of herself. And only one member of this household had a bushy tail.

"Elvia?"

"Y-Yes?!" She poked her head into the living room. "I-I'm real sorry! I wasn't, like, listenin' in or anything. I was just, uh, well, wonderin' what you were all talking about..."

"So you were eavesdropping."

"Er, no, well..."

That seemed to be all she had. Maybe she'd had too much time on her hands,

or maybe curiosity had gotten the better of her. She didn't seem to be thinking about how behaving like this could negatively impact her position. She was originally a spy sent here from Bahairam, and although we no longer had serious suspicions about her anymore—heck, we were prone to forget the fact entirely—too much sneaky listening ran the risk of raising new questions.

“Say, Elvia. You're just the person I wanted to see.” This came from Hikaru-san, who had been quiet until that moment. “Sorry for the trouble, but do you think you could take Minori-san somewhere?”

“...Uh...” She blinked.

“Her ‘illness’ has flared up again. We aren't going to be able to have a productive conversation this way.”

“Oh! Sure thing!” Elvia, too, was all too familiar with Minori-san's “illness.” She nodded and came over to Minori-san, taking her arms.

“...But I see that a new obstacle to this true love blossoming has appeared in the form of this prince! After all, they're living in the castle together, under the selfsame roof...” Minori-san was apparently too busy with her fantasy to notice Elvia dragging her away. “And could it possibly be that nothing would happen with them a stone's throw away from each other?! No, it's impossible! No, wait, the story isn't over y— Wait, noooooo~~~”

Her voice got farther and farther away. When I was sure she was gone, I turned back to the parents.

“...Er.”

“She's sick,” Hikaru-san said with a blithe smile. “These little flare-ups, they happen.”

“Do they, indeed...” The adults still seemed somewhat taken aback.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Loek gazing out the doorway where Minori-san had disappeared. His eyes were glistening, obviously the look of a man in love. To think that he had seen Minori-san's “illness” firsthand and still felt the same way—was it possible Loek himself had a couple of screws loose?

Anyway, back to business.

“So, what were we talking about?” I said, gathering myself back up.

“Oh, yes.” The parents nodded, their faces still grim.

Eric-san cleared his throat. “Ahem, as we were saying, Her Majesty and His Highness Garius both seem to have a soft spot for you, Shinichi-dono.”

“Well, if you say so... But even if you’re right, what does that have to do with anything?”

“Interesting you should ask.” Eric-san sighed, then said, “We have devised a possible solution that could resolve this factional dispute entirely.”

“And that would be...?”

“A marriage. Between Her Majesty and Minister Cordobal.”

I almost choked. But when I thought about it, there was a certain logic to it. Both were legitimate members of the imperial family, meaning that there could be no objection in terms of lineage or social status. There had been royal dynasties in my own world that prized “purity of blood” so highly that they would even marry close relatives to maintain it. For that matter, modern Japanese law still recognized marriages between cousins. So the idea had real plausibility. And yet...

As far as I knew, Petralka had never shown any romantic interest in Garius. At best he was like an older brother to her. And Garius seemed to see her the same way, like a younger sister. In fact, sometimes I almost thought I sensed a hint of reserve in the way the two treated each other. Maybe it had to do with their parents. They’d seemed pretty close recently, but sometimes things could be awkward between them.

And then there was the simple fact that Garius didn’t seem especially interested in the opposite sex. So even if we somehow convinced or cajoled the two into getting together, it would be a complete sham, a marriage with nothing in it. No further heirs to the imperial throne would be born. Then distant relatives might well appear, claiming that they had imperial blood in their veins and a right to rule—and then the power struggles would begin all over again, and things in the Holy Eldant Empire would be even more chaotic than before.

Ultimately, having Petralka as empress and Garius as regent had been nothing more than a stopgap measure. It couldn't last forever, and everyone knew it—yet in order to keep the peace between the loyalists of the First and Second Princes, there was no choice but to maintain this status quo.

But the status quo stopped being the status quo when...

“You came here.”

“Me?”

Kanou Shinichi. Yes, I had caused more confusion at first, but then I had earned the “imperial affection” of Petralka, and, just maybe, the “interest” of Garius, making me, in a way, the third corner of a triangle. With me in the middle, so to speak, Petralka and Garius had actually seemed to grow closer. This made the First and Second Prince factions more secure, and gave them time to look for another solution. So they actually welcomed my arrival, if only as an expedient. They even seemed to think that if this trend continued, Petralka and Garius might grow so close that the groups' original goal—a marriage between the two royals—might actually be possible.

...Geez, I had no idea. They were planning this all along?

“But if Her Majesty accepts Prince Rubert's proposal, that delicate balance will be shattered.”

Ahh, so the threat they'd talked about was Rubert himself.

“Er, but, just because Petralka gets married... Does that mean she can't go on being empress and Garius-san can't go on being regent?”

And again: where did I come in?

The parents regarded me severely. “If they were to wed, then in deference to our alliance with Zwelberich, we may expect that Her Majesty would begin to keep her distance from you, Shinichi-dono.”

“Huh? But—”

But why should she? I had been about to object, but the lightbulb went on in a hurry. People thought the empress was in love with me. Once she married Rubert, if she were to continue to remain close to me—well, it wouldn't look

very good. Say Petralka had a baby, and people started to question whether it was really Rubert's child... In fact, it would be all too easy for people to accuse Petralka of throwing away the long-standing alliance between the Eldant Empire and Zwelberich in favor of the much newer relationship with Japan. And that wouldn't bode well for diplomacy.

"What's more, Zwelberich may be our ally. But if Prince Rubert were to be Her Majesty's husband..." Eric-san took a handkerchief out of his bag and wiped his brow. "It would, in principle, give Prince Rubert direct and legitimate power over our nation. We worry that in the worst case, our country could be absorbed into Zwelberich."

There was definitely some logic to that concern. Petralka might be an empress, but she was still a seventeen-year-old girl. Next to her, Prince Rubert was an adult man. When it came to knowledge and experience, he had Petralka beat. It would be by no means impossible to look up and suddenly realize Rubert held the reins of power, and the Eldant Empire had been effectively conquered.

There had been royal marriages between countries in the past, I was informed, but in every case they had involved a woman entering the imperial or royal household of the other country. There had rarely if ever been a case where a male entered the bride's imperial or royal line.

"On top of all that, Zwelberich may be our ally, but they are notorious for their ill will toward demi-humans," Rydel-san said, grimacing. "If their prince were to rule us, then our position might become quite tenuous."

Ahh... Yes, that made sense. If Prince Rubert, from Zwelberich, were to be in charge of the disposition of ministers in the Eldant Empire, families like the Slaysons and the Gulds could find themselves up against the wall. Worst-case scenario, everything they had worked to build, their status and their stipends, could easily be stripped away from them.

And not just them. The fact that there were elves and dwarves among Eldant's elite wasn't lost on the common people. There was discrimination against demi-humans here, sure, but it wasn't bad compared to many other countries, and that had a lot to do with the presence of influential demi-

humans like the people in front of me. If they were to be forced out of the government, the effect could trickle down until it impacted even the people around me—the Myusels and Elvias, the Brookes and Cerises of the world.

That would be bad. Awful, in fact. Discrimination at our school was getting to be less and less, in part thanks to diligent teaching, but also in part because the Eldant Empire was already a relatively tolerant place.

“B-But Garius-san must have thought about all this already, right...?” It was inconceivable that these courtiers and even I would pick up on an impending crisis that Garius had simply missed. Surely he would come up with some kind of stratagem without us having to get all bent out of shape over it?

I felt so sure about this, but the parents’ faces only got darker.

Huh? But why?

“As a matter of fact...” Rydel-san lowered his voice and leaned forward. Sensing that he wanted to speak as secretly as possible, I leaned in, too. “Prince Rubert is said to be the, ahem... the reason His Highness Garius discovered... the way he is.”

.....Come again?

My brain was already all but completely overwhelmed by the relentless series of shocks to my system.

“The way he is”? Did he mean, like... *that way*?

“Discovered? But wasn’t Garius-san, you know... *always*...?” Even as I questioned them, I was immensely grateful that Minori-san wasn’t here right now. If she’d been privy to this conversation, we might have finally lost her for good. Er, not that I knew where we would have lost her *to*. A land of love where every (BL) dream came true, I guess. Gandhara! (Meaning unknown.) “His Highness Garius once went to the Kingdom of Zwelberich for study, and to further strengthen relations between our two nations...”

Oh, yeah—I had heard about that. And according to Eric-san, Rubert had been his host at the time. And I guess Rubert had pounded a lot of things into Garius’s— Whoa, whoa, whoa.

But then again... to be in a foreign country, far from home... Even if it was an allied nation... Even if Garius had traveling companions, it would be only natural for him to feel lonely. And if there was one person who was exceptionally kind to him, well, I could understand how his heart might turn toward them.

Still—and I know I was late to the party on this, but—to imagine Garius really was *like that*... To realize Minori-san had been right all along... Yes, I get it, I should have known! But wouldn't it have been hilarious if it had all been a joke?!

Hm? But wait... Wouldn't that make Prince Rubert, you know, Garius's... uh... ex-boyfriend?

Yikes! Even just thinking the word “ex-boyfriend” about a guy felt a bit, y’know, *what-you-mean-for-real?* But then again, it would help Garius’s behavior this morning make sense. But then again *again*, it would mean that Minori-san’s ridiculous fantasy about him and Rubert being boyfriends was... actually completely true.

“But in that case, wouldn't Prince Rubert...” Wouldn't he ask *Garius* to marry him?

I thought about it, and realized that in my own world, there were places that recognized gay marriage, like certain American states and even some entire countries. But here in the Eldant Empire? I guess I didn't know what I expected. Setting aside any kind of value judgment on same-sex love, a union between two men wasn't going to produce any children—and when a country's political fortunes could rest entirely on the line of succession, same-sex marriage was not likely to be smiled upon. If anything...

“...Oh.” I finally registered the problem. “If Garius-san still has feelings for Prince Rubert, then maybe... he *wouldn't* oppose this marriage...?”

If Petralka and Rubert got married, then by definition, Garius would be spending a lot of time around the prince. As men, they might not be able to actually get married, but this way, they would effectively be living together...

“That is the possibility we fear,” Eric-san said, interrupting my thoughts.

I see... This is... What can I say...?

“That is why you are so important,” Rydel-san added, leaning in again.

They looked so deadly serious, I wanted to draw back—but each of them placed a hand on one of my hands, almost as if to say they wouldn’t let me get away.

“Look, I don’t understand why I—”

“You are high in Her Majesty’s affections, and a man.” Eric-san’s wife Agnes spoke up for the first time. “In a matter like this, you have great influence over the empress.”

“What?” How did that work? Were these parents making the same mistake Bahairam had? Did they seriously think that I was on the receiving end of the *physical* imperial affections?

“In addition, you aren’t connected to either the First Prince’s faction, or the Second, or even to the Kingdom of Zwelberich. You’re a neutral third party, with nothing either to gain or to lose in the outcome of this situation. That’s why your objection to the union of Her Majesty and Prince Rubert would carry weight. And yours alone.”

I didn’t say anything for a long time.

So, to sum up: I was the only one who could save the empire from crisis.

...Okay, no, seriously, wait a minute.

If I told Petralka not to get married, wouldn’t it come across as me being jealous of Rubert? Maybe even implicitly offering her a proposal myself?

“Please, you *must* help us.” All four of the parents looked at me with imploring eyes. If nothing else, I could tell they hadn’t come to talk to me just on a whim. But still...!

“Please...!”

I flinched as four faces drew close to mine. But the parents were still holding onto my hands, and I couldn’t get away. So: “L-Let me think about it, okay?”

It was all I could manage to say.



The next day. We had just finished breakfast when Matoba-san showed up.

I made to move us all into the living room, but he waved a hand and said we were fine where we were, then took an open spot at the table. Myusel offered to bring him some breakfast, but he refused with a smile. Now he was sipping the tea she had poured for him.

“Say, where is Koganuma-kun?” he asked, looking around the dining area.

Myusel, Brooke, and Cerise were all absent, having left to go about their respective jobs now that breakfast was over. Elvia was gone, too, back to her room. Matoba-san was left talking to just me and Hikaru-san. Minori-san, our bodyguard, would normally have been with us, but...

“Uhh... She hasn’t been feeling her best since yesterday. Sorry.”

The truth was, Minori-san was still caught in the grip of a rampaging BL fever. Heck, she had somehow managed to turn the table and chairs into characters in a steamy romantic drama. Suffice to say, she was in bad shape. Worried that prolonged exposure to her would infect the rest of us with her “illness,” we had already hustled her off to her room before Matoba-san showed up.

“You want me to go get her?” I asked.

“I see. No, just the two of you will be fine.”

“All right,” I said, and privately I was very relieved.

“So—what brings you here today?” Hikaru-san asked. He took a sip of his tea, elegant as ever, and glanced at me before going on, “Does the Japanese government have something to say about this whole marriage kerfuffle?”

My breath caught in my throat. My brain had been so full of the visit from Loek, Romilda, and their parents yesterday that I hadn’t even gotten around to thinking about my own government. But it made sense: Matoba-san had been there when Rubert had proposed to Petralka, and he must have told Japan about it. I couldn’t imagine Japan would just sit quietly by and watch something this politically important unfold.

“Clever. Yes, that’s exactly why I’m here,” Matoba-san said with a smile.

.....*Uh-oh.*

I felt a chill. Why was I so worried? Because there was no greater sign of danger than a plain smile from Matoba-san. He was the quintessential bureaucrat, in the worst possible way. Smiling at someone as he stabbed them in the back was second nature to him. Sometimes it seemed like the only reason he ever smiled was to throw you off the trail.

“Their opinion is that they very much want Shinichi-kun to be certain he has a firm hold on Her Majesty’s feelings.”

“Wha...?”

What was he talking about? I blinked stupidly as Matoba-san, with deliberate nonchalance, went on, “Frankly, there seems little question that Amutech’s current position in the Holy Eldant Empire, and by extension that of the Japanese government, is due in no small measure to the empress’s personal feelings for Shinichi-kun.”

“No doubt.”

I had lost the ability to speak, so this grinning answer came from Hikaru-san. The way his long, black hair cascaded down onto his shoulders... He wasn’t deliberately showing a lot of skin, yet it was weirdly alluring. Dammit, I didn’t think of myself as the least bit interested in guys, but every time I looked at him, it was like a door that nearly cracked open... But forget about that for now.

“If Shinichi-kun were to lose the imperial affections... Well, in a worst-case scenario, we could be deprived of our base of operations within the Eldant Empire.”

“I don’t have any *imperial affections*...! Wait, you really think it would be that big a deal?”

Matoba-san’s tone was as mellow and nonthreatening as ever, but he was essentially saying that the very existence of Amutech, General Entertainment Company, could be at stake.

“The Japanese government thinks so, at least.” Matoba-san shrugged. “After yesterday’s, ahem, events, I went back to Japan and reported what had happened. In the government’s view, Rubert’s proposal could be an attempt at checking Japanese influence.”

“Checking? You mean, like, trying to stop us?”

“He deliberately invited us to that audience, did he not?”

“Oh...”

Come to think of it, Petralka did say that the ambassador from Zwelberich had specifically asked for us to be there. And yet neither Rubert nor any of his attendants had really spoken to us at all. I’d assumed that was because of all the chaos on the Eldant side, followed by having to get ready for the big welcome banquet, but...

“Some of my bosses believe that Rubert’s choosing this juncture to propose marriage could be a means of preventing Japan from usurping Zwelberich’s position in the Eldant Empire’s priorities. And if so, once he and Her Majesty are wed, the next step could be Japan’s forcible expulsion from the country.”

“Gosh...” It certainly made sense.

“Even if such political considerations aren’t at the top of his mind,” Matobasan said, setting down his tea cup, “his feelings as a man, as a person, can’t be ignored. It would surely not be to his liking for his wife to be too cozy with another man. How many stories are there in our own history of a patroness who became very... *well acquainted*... with an artist she was supporting?”

“Well, sure, but...”

“And if Her Majesty the Empress should entertain a dalliance with you, Shinichi-kun...”

“D-Dalliance?” My voice went up an octave. Why was he using soap-opera language like that?! Look, I still hadn’t had my first kiss, let alone my first time!

“Her husband Rubert would become a laughingstock. An unbearable outcome for a person of such status.”

“Okay, for the sake of argument, let’s say you’re right. So?”

“The simplest way for Prince Rubert to guard against such a turn of events would be for him to get rid of you, Shinichi-kun, as quickly as possible—and ideally all of Amutech with you.”

I didn’t respond immediately. When he put it that way... well, I couldn’t say

he was wrong.

“It’s true... You do have to wonder why he would propose *now*,” Hikaru-san said, his chin in his hand. “The age of majority in the Eldant Empire is sixteen, right?”

“Er, yeah,” I said. That was part of why Petralka had been so ticked off when I gave her the loli treatment at our first meeting. She was already an adult by then.

“Assuming the marriage age is the same, then if Zwelberich had been planning this all along, you would have expected them to raise the possibility as soon as the empress turned sixteen. For that matter, royal marriages are often arranged a lot earlier than that.”

Age of majority or no, an agreement between the highest powers in Eldant and Zwelberich could trump the law itself. It wasn’t even impossible that the empress could have been married off before sixteen, on the grounds that imperial family members were a special case. In short, there had been every opportunity for the Kingdom of Zwelberich—for Prince Rubert—to propose marriage to Petralka long before this. But they hadn’t. So why now? It had to be because circumstances had changed somehow. Such as...

“Because I came here...?”

“That would make the most sense,” Hikaru-san said.

“Agreed,” Matoba-san said with a nod.

“Arrgh... Why’s everyone got to come to *me* about this?” I groaned, resisting the urge to grab my temples.

“‘Everyone’...?” Matoba-san raised an eyebrow.

Oops. Had I said that out loud?

Hikaru-san spoke up before I had the chance. “Romilda-san and Loek-kun and their parents showed up yesterday.” Then he went on to explain the meeting with the adults and the request they had made of me. All about the competing factions in the Eldant government, the threat to the elvish and dwarven counsellors—and what they wanted me to do about it.

“Hmm... In other words, just about the same thing Japan wants,” Matoba-san said, tapping a finger against his chin. “Shinichi-kun, you yourself have a fair amount to lose if Amutech goes under, don’t you? Though perhaps not enough to lose sleep over.”

“It just...” I let out a deep sigh. “Rubs me the wrong way.”

This wasn’t about marrying someone because you were in love with them. It was about an individual doing something purely to benefit his or her country, or to prevent harm to that country. The feelings of the people involved didn’t matter. Only the state. The institution of marriage was being used to serve political, organizational ends.

“I hate the feeling that Petralka’s and Garius-san’s feelings are being treated as incidental. Like they don’t matter, or don’t even exist.”

“That’s how it goes for royals and nobles, a lot of the time.” Hikaru-san shrugged. “I’m sure you’ve seen this in movies and books and stuff.”

“Those are fiction. They aren’t real. At the very least, I want to save Petralka from being used as a political tool.”

“Oh ho...?” Hikaru-san’s blink was so exaggerated you could almost hear it. “Finally starting to realize, at this late date?”

“Huh? Realize what?”

“...Never mind.”

I didn’t know what he was getting at, but he looked away from me and gave a theatrical sigh.

Aw, what? Had I done something wrong?

“Ahem. In any event,” Matoba-san said, “the Japanese government objects to the empress’s marriage. Let me reiterate: Amutech and all the Japanese efforts here exist only thanks to Her Majesty’s good graces. If and when she loses or is deprived of interest in you, Shinichi-kun, we may suddenly find the tide against us.”

“But Petralka— She’s the one person who wouldn’t—”

Just turn her back on me like that, I wanted to say. I thought it was true. Let

Prince Rubert be jealous of me—I still didn't think she would just fold Amutech up and kick us out.

Hikaru-san, though, shook his head, a strained look on his face. It was almost like he could read my thoughts. "Happens all the time. A girl gets a boyfriend, suddenly she's not so close to her other male friends. Maybe you think she wouldn't do that, but we won't really know until it happens, will we?"

"You really think so...?"

"Uh-huh." Hikaru-san nodded with, I thought, an unwarranted amount of confidence. For him to be so firm about this—maybe he was speaking from experience. Come to think of it, I didn't really know what his life had been like before he came to Eldant. Just because he dressed up like a girl, that didn't mean he had to like guys. Maybe he'd had some friends who were girls—or more to the point, some girlfriends.

As for me—someone who had hardly had any friends who were girls, except for that old friend of mine, and who had certainly never had a girlfriend—I didn't have any way of knowing what the truth was.

"So, Shinichi-san." Suddenly, Hikaru-san turned toward me. He didn't just look at me—he shifted so his entire body was facing me. "This is the moment."

"Uh... Which moment?"

"The moment where, if you want to keep being friends with Her Majesty, you have to find out how you feel about each other."

"Look, I told you..."

"In fact, let's face it: *friends* isn't going to be enough. You at least have to make it to *boyfriend and girlfriend*."

"You really think that's the only way?!" I wailed. "I can't—I can't do it! It's impossible!"

"Why is it impossible? You don't hate Her Majesty, do you? In fact, I'd say..."

"But I don't even know how Petralka feels about me...!"

"*Her Majesty... Shinichi-sama, she... seems to... I-love you...*"

Myusel's words came back to me with a shattering reality.

Well, heck! I'm a guy! If a girl that cute really loved me, that would make me very happy! If there were no politics involved, if she just confessed to me like any girl anywhere, I'd go out with her in a flash!

(Long pause.) Imagine the scene: the shadow of a tall tree stretching through a twilit evening. No one around. No sound but the gentle susurrus of the wind in the leaves.

"Shinichi..." she says, her voice threatening to scratch. She clasps her pale hands together in front of the chest of her sailor suit, as if grasping something precious. Then she takes a slow, deep breath. "Listen well. Because we are only going to say this once."

"Huh? What's up, Petralka? You still—"

"We have wanted and wanted to tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"But we simply could not find the courage. We waited, in hopes that you might notice, that you might *sense* something, but at last we must admit that you are simply too dense. We are afraid we would graduate before you got it through that thick skull of yours."

"Seriously, what are you talking about?"

"Shinichi—" She looks at me, resolution clear on her face. Her eyes are like great gleaming jewels—and is it just me, or are they starting to brim?



“We love you. We love you with all our heart.”

“Wha...?”

I stand there, shocked, as she throws herself at me. All I can do is take her delicate body in my arms...

For a long moment neither of us say anything. Until finally...

“Shinichi-san?”

“Er, yeah, I’m here.”

Hikaru-san’s voice brought me back to reality. “I think I have a good guess what you were fantasizing about, but we need you in the real world right now,” he said.

“Yeah, sorry about that.” I was at risk of losing my right to laugh at Minorisan.

“In any event, the only thing we can do now—is act!” Hikaru-san clenched his fist, a rather uncharacteristic gesture for him. Maybe it just went to show how much the Holy Eldant Empire, Amutech, and the life he was living now had come to mean to him. If he could have done something about this situation without me, I bet he would have. I bet he would have tried everything he could possibly think of.

But...

“I’m the guy who confessed to his oldest friend and got shot down on the spot, did you know that?” I could feel my own face fall. “I’m a completely hopeless otaku. I don’t have any idea what to do here. I don’t have the first clue how to get a girl to like me!”

Hikaru-san and Matoba-san were silent. For some reason, they exchanged a long look. Finally, Hikaru-san turned back toward me, the edges of his lips twitching.

Huh? Is he... mad?

“I super want to hit you right now.”

“Agreed.”

“Huh?! Why?!”

And why Matoba-san, too?!

“God! There’s dense, and then there’s— Ahh, forget it.” Hikaru-san let out a long, disgusted sigh. Even Matoba-san was looking at me with open exasperation. That sort of obvious emotion was unusual for him.

“C-Come on, isn’t Matoba-san usually the expert at these things?!”

“Hm...?”

“I mean, deep down, this is a political problem, isn’t it? Why have me get mixed up in it? Why not have Matoba-san or someone else from the government negotiate?”

If the real goal was to nix the wedding between Petralka and Prince Rubert, there had to be some other way. Though I had to admit that by leaving it to Matoba-san and the Japanese government, I risked them taking some underhanded, unimaginably dark measure to get what they wanted.

“I would love to do that, sincerely I would, but I’m afraid it isn’t an option,” Matoba-san said with a shrug. “You once said something about being given a nutrient drink with lizardman tail in it, did you not?”

“Huh? Er, yeah.” I blinked, caught off guard by the sudden change of subject. Matoba-san was referring to a time Myusel had made me a drink to help keep my energy up when I had been burning the midnight oil. It was sweet, carbonated—and turned out to feature grilled, shaved lizard tail. Though the drink was sweet, there was an unusual bitter undercurrent—not bad, but sort of strange.

“The Japanese government found that story intriguing,” Matoba-san said, “and they had me bring some home to investigate.” Apparently, they had asked Myusel to make more of the drink with her leftover ingredients. “When we did so, we discovered that it did indeed possess the ability to relieve muscular fatigue.”

“Huh? Really?” I said, eyes wide. Hikaru-san looked just as surprised as I was. Matoba-san nodded at us.

Then again, Myusel *had* said that grilled lizardman tail helped beat fatigue or something. So it wasn't just some kind of placebo effect, but actually had scientific validity.

"Animal testing produced some results that have Japan very excited."

"About making people less tired?"

"Don't underestimate the value of fatigue reduction, Shinichi-kun." Hearing this from Matoba-san, who seemed perpetually overworked, it somehow sounded especially true. "Long-term, there are even hopes that it might prove to have rejuvenating properties, anti-aging effects. Let's just say the geriatric crowd are tripping over themselves to get a hold of it."

"Ah..." I assumed that the "crowd" he had in mind was parliamentarians—well, anyway, politicians.

"If we could synthesize this ingredient, it could turn the medical field upside down, or so some people are claiming. Politics and economics themselves would not be immune from the effects."

"All that because of a lizardman's tail?" Talk about unexpected turns of a conversation.

"I came here to talk to you about the marriage affair—but as it happens, I have to go directly back to Japan. With a fresh sample, you see."

"You're not planning to kidnap my gardener, are you?"

"Nothing of the sort. Samples are being obtained by trade with lizardmen in the castle town. Don't fret, it's all above board." He gave me a wry smile and made an "OK" gesture. Apparently they were actually paying for the bits of tail they were collecting. According to Brooke, the amount of tail used in a drink like that was hardly bigger than the tip of a pinky finger, and grew back in about a week. It might actually prove to be a nice side gig for the lizardmen.

"All of which is to say, we're leaving things in your hands, Shinichi-kun. Thank you for your help!"

"But—"

"Don't worry about a thing." That reassuring answer came not from me, but

from Hikaru-san. Wait... why was he so keen on this? “And don’t *you* worry, either, Shinichi-san. I’ve got a script all worked out.”

“A script? I’m sorry?”

“Just say the words, and Her Majesty will be like putty in your hands. You’ve already tripped most of the important flags. As long as you don’t completely screw this up, I guarantee you’ll succeed.”

“Uh... huh.” Faced with this much confidence on Hikaru-san’s part, all I could give was a non-committal nod.

They were right about one thing: to just stand by and do nothing would really suck. If Petralka got married, and if Loek and Romilda’s parents, and Matoba-san and the Japanese government all found themselves in the sort of danger they were expecting... well, Amutech probably wouldn’t be long for this world. And that would mean I wouldn’t be long for this mansion. And *that* would mean saying goodbye to Myusel, Elvia, Brooke, and Cerise. Heck, Myusel might find herself out on the street with no job, and Elvia’s past as a Bahairamanian spy might come back to haunt her again. Maybe she would even be killed.

I didn’t want that to happen. I refused to let it happen.

I wasn’t on board with the actual plan—seriously, my heart wasn’t in it—but unless and until I had a better idea, the only thing I could do was play along.



Holy Eldant Castle.

As you might deduce from the fact that it basically shares its name with the entire nation, this building was the center of the Empire, or at least its center of power. Carved directly out of a mountain using magic, it was almost more a part of the terrain than a building. Look up from anywhere in the capital city, and you could see the castle.

Every time I saw the place, I could only stand in awe of the power of the Holy Eldant Emperor who had had the thing built generations before, not to mention the skill and technique of the dwarven craftsmen who had carried it out. On the other hand, it was *so* big that managing and administering it could be an

unwieldy task.

In contrast to the elaborate exterior, the inside of the castle was relatively quiet: it wasn't unusual to walk through the halls for minutes on end without seeing another person. The size was chiefly about communicating authority; I assume the planning stage began with somebody saying, "Let's make it as big as we can." The building included a number of parts that were basically for show; they weren't structurally necessary, but if you wandered into one of them it was easy to get lost. By the same token, though, that meant the castle was riddled with out-of-the-way corners where no one was likely to notice you.

"Garius..."

At this moment, a voice called out to someone walking through just such a quiet part of the castle: a silver-haired young man, Minister Garius en Cordobal.

Garius slowly came to a halt. After a beat—of hesitation?—he turned toward the owner of the voice. The movement sent a ripple through his long hair. There was no hint of surprise or question on his face. He recognized the voice; already knew who had called him. Now there was no hesitation. No flinch of anguish. Garius's expression was as placid and untroubled as ever.

"Yes?"

He didn't ask who was there. The person who walked up to Garius where he stood, so still he could have been a statue, was a young man dressed in clothing that caught the light, much like his golden hair.

Prince Rubert Wollyn. The ambassador of the Kingdom of Zwelberich approached Minister Garius with elegant steps that revealed the nobility of his upbringing, and stopped just in front of him. Neither of them spoke immediately.

The two young men were about the same height. Prince Rubert, though, had just a few inches on Garius, so that from this distance the minister was compelled to look up slightly at him.

"It's been some time since we saw each other last," the prince said. "Since you studied in Zwelberich, I believe."

"Indeed... This would be our first proper meeting since then."

Prince Rubert gazed at Garius, a gentle smile on his face. The smile was measured, but his eyes, each of which seemed like a great, blue sea, were infinitely kind and sweet. Was that simply his personality? Or was it because he was looking at Garius en Cordobal?

Garius, however, remained completely unmoved. There was no hint of anything less than complete composure. How must that have looked to Rubert? A twinge of pain lanced through the Prince's smile. "You're awfully cold, considering how long it's been."

Garius didn't say anything, but for the first time, his face shifted. The mask slipped and revealed surprise. It was an honest, almost youthful expression of emotion. But Garius quickly regained control of himself. Almost as if he hadn't heard Prince Rubert, he said, "I believe my attitude befits a conversation with the ambassador of an allied nation." His tone, of course, was cool. But to anyone who knew much about this man, Garius en Cordobal, it would have been obvious that his disinterest was affected.

Prince Rubert's smile grew even kinder. "I see." His hand, his beautiful hand—soft and pale in a way that bespoke a man who had never known hard labor—reached out toward Garius. For a bare instant, Garius's body stiffened. The fingers reached for his cheek, but never touched his skin; instead, they traced their way along his flowing silver hair.

Garius stood, silent and absolutely still. Rubert's fingers moved slowly, as if savoring the feeling of the other man's hair. Just when it seemed his hand would emerge from the cascade of silver, Rubert suddenly moved his hand back the other way, lifting up Garius's locks. He brought it to his face and planted a single, gentle kiss upon it.

A kiss on the hair, in our world, is said to communicate longing—was it the same here in the Eldant Empire, or even in this world? Whatever the case, Prince Rubert's kiss seemed to surprise Garius. His hand swept up, pushing Rubert's away; the motion carried Garius off balance and he took a couple of unsteady steps back.

An unequivocal refusal. But Rubert looked almost as if the whole thing amused him. He wasn't put off his stride. It was almost as if he were saying, /

know that's not the real you.

“How sad, to be treated like a stranger. But that is profoundly in character for you.” Prince Rubert brought a hand to his mouth, as if to hide the smile that was starting there.

As for Garius: “Enough... It’s too late for that.” He looked at Rubert with something close to open hostility. Yet there was a tremble in his voice he couldn’t disguise. Something that betrayed his hard exterior, something that gave away the confusion within.

No doubt Prince Rubert saw it, too. He looked at Garius almost pleadingly and said, “Too late...?”

“All that time ago... You didn’t even try to stop me.” Garius didn’t seem critical so much as he sounded almost like he was talking to himself, remembering something from long ago. The prince’s eyes went wide for a second. Before him was the young knight who held authority over the entire Eldant military, yet at this moment he looked like a shaking puppy, abandoned in the rain.

Maybe that was why...

“I’m afraid I didn’t have a choice in the matter.” Rubert met Garius’s accusing gaze with one of absolute tenderness. “In my position, I could never have stopped you. You know that, don’t you?”

Garius didn’t respond.

“All that time ago” must have been at the end of Garius’s time in Zewelberich, I guessed, just before he left the country. In other words, the moment when he had parted from Rubert—when they had gone their separate ways. Neither of them was first in line for his country’s succession, yet both were of royal blood. They bore the hopes and expectations of their nations. However much they might care for each other, that unbridgeable gulf stood between them. Prince Rubert knew that, and of course, so did Garius. But still...

“And yet...” Rubert’s voice was a whisper. “We will be together forever, from now on. That’s why I’ve come.”

Garius looked up with an unvoiced sound of shock and blinked. But Rubert

was already walking past him, as if to indicate that he had nothing more to say. As he went by Garius, who still looked vacant and confused, Rubert patted him on the shoulder—then kept walking. He got farther and farther down the corridor. The castle was pretty dark, even here at noon, but his golden locks caught the light that did filter in, and gleamed even as they faded into the distance. Everything seemed cold, as if time had stopped. Only the departing Rubert looked alive.

Garius kept staring resolutely forward, refusing to turn around. Finally he, too, started walking. His long, silver hair wavered with every step.

There was a long pause. There was no one there. Or at least, for an instant, it seemed so.

But in fact there was. As soon as Garius turned the corner out of sight, one of the shadows shifted and someone emerged. A woman. A young woman, her long, black hair tied up in a bun behind her head.

She was one of the attendants who had come to Eldant with Prince Rubert. One of his bodyguards, presumably; she had remained quiet so as not to interrupt a personal conversation. So why was she, and she alone, here? And why so secretly, melding with the shadows so that Garius would never notice her?

The woman spent a long moment looking in the direction Garius had gone, and then finally went after her master Rubert at a quick clip.

Ahhh. So that was it. It had to be.

She was one of *them*.

Or should I say, one of *us*.

A fellow exponent of man-on-man love.

“Hoo hoo, ooh hoo hoo hoo... heh heh heh!” As I watched the image on my smartphone, coming from one of the super-small cameras set up all around Eldant Castle, I, Koganuma Minori, began to tremble with joy.

Chapter Three: The Great Honey Plot

We went to Eldant Castle to report Amutech's activities—as usual. Also as usual, in attendance were me, Minori-san, and Hikaru-san. Everything really was exactly the same as normal, but I felt like I had a lead weight inside me. Today was the day when, allegedly to save Amutech and protect Eldant's demi-humans, I had to try to chat up Petralka.

I let out a long sigh. How many sighs was this? I'd lost count. Hikaru-san, walking beside me, jabbed me with his elbow. "Try to look more important."

"Yeah... but... y'know?"

"*Another man* is about to steal Her Majesty the Empress away from you. Can you really live with that?"

I didn't say anything. Was it just my imagination, or had I fallen into a trap with no way out? I was just sighing again when I noticed something. "Huh?"

Our morning reports normally took place in the smaller of the two audience chambers, and I had expected it would be the same today—but the knights were guiding us toward the larger hall, the one where we had first met Prince Rubert.

"Are we over here today?" Hikaru-san asked.

"That's correct. Her Majesty instructed that you be brought here when you arrived."

Then the knights called out, in voices loud enough to be heard on the other side of the thick wooden door, that we had arrived. Without a moment's delay, the door opened with a heavy creaking, and we went inside.

I entered the audience chamber still beset by a clinging anxiety. Inside, it looked a lot like it had last time: knights and advisors lined up along a red carpet, at the far end of which sat Petralka on her throne, flanked by Garius and Zahar.

"...Oh."

And standing in front of Petralka was, of course, Prince Rubert with his attendants.

“Well come, Shinichi,” Petralka said. We could physically feel the attention of the room shift to us as we walked toward her.

Halfway there, I spotted Eric-san and Rydel-san among the counselors, and my heart got even heavier. Naturally, they were staring at me as if they might be able to telepathically communicate the message, “Please help us!”

I came to a stop in front of Petralka—meaning, right next to Rubert. “E-Er, s-so we’re in this room today?” I started. This was normally the part of the conversation where I would lead with some pleasant chatter, but I could barely keep my voice from scraping.

I felt Hikaru-san tug on my sleeve, and looked over at him. “...Oops.”

Minori-san was already down on one knee, her head bowed, and Hikaru-san was halfway there. I quickly knelt myself—and then I understood. This was not going to be an ordinary audience between me and Petralka. I couldn’t just stand there and shoot the breeze with the empress in front of Prince Rubert and half the Eldant nobility. I had to act like someone who was meeting the absolute monarch. Wait—was it going to be like this the entire time Rubert was here?! Was I going to have to make my move on Petralka with the entire court watching?! We were way past Nightmare difficulty here—this was impossible!

While I was mentally coming apart...

“You need not stand on ceremony,” Petralka said with a smile. “We simply called you here because Rubert has expressed an interest in the nature of your activities. By all means, do as you always do.”

I looked up with a sigh, this time of relief, and got up.

“For some time now I have heard talk of you,” Prince Rubert said, his lips upturned. “They say your country boasts a proud and rich culture. I humbly ask you, if you would, to tell me of your land.” There was that princely smile, that breeziness and nobility that seemed to meet in some far-off plane to create that perfect Real-ness, all but overwhelming me.

No way! This was impossible! Trying to outdo this guy in a courtship contest

was like taking on a Perfect Zeo*g with a B*ll! I wasn't sure I even belonged in the same category of human being as him!

"Er... Uh..." I was suddenly frozen. How pathetic.

Prince Rubert cocked his head curiously, and Petralka supplied an explanation-cum-lifeline: "Shinichi is not accustomed to these surroundings. He sometimes jokes about by doing or saying uncouth things, but you may freely ignore him."

Okay, so it was a lifeline where I got thrown under the bus.

"Oh, I am much the same," Prince Rubert said, smiling generously. "I get anxious in such stiff settings."

"You jest, Rubert."

"I am quite serious. Especially here—" he said, turning toward Petralka, "—because Your Majesty's beauty leaves me speechless."

Daaaaamn. Was this a play? Was he an actor? Because I've never, ever met someone who could say something like that with a straight face and really mean it! O Rubert, a prince to be feared...!

"Prince Rubert, you have such a mouth on you," Petralka said, but she didn't look exactly displeased.

Ahh. I guess it really does make a girl happy to hear that sort of thing, even if she knows you don't quite mean it.

"Such a mouth as speaks only the truth," the Prince replied without missing a beat. Of course. Still... I had to admit, he didn't *sound* like he was flirting. He and Petralka both had this tone like they were just exchanging hellos. I guess they'd had this sort of conversation more than once. But that in itself implied that Rubert knew a side of Petralka that I didn't.

The idea of Rubert and Petralka getting married hadn't clicked for me; I just hadn't been quite able to imagine it. But when I saw them standing there bantering with each other, suddenly it started to seem real—and I saw why Eric-san and Rydel-san would feel so much urgency. All political problems aside, if and when Petralka announced publicly that she would accept Rubert's suit, it

would be very difficult to go back.

As all this was running through my mind, though, Petralka gave a little cough and said, “Ahem, Shinichi...” She seemed to want to say something—seemed to expect something—but I didn’t know what it could be.

“Y-Yes?”

“Is there nothing you wish to say?”

Anything I wanted to say?

Right here and now?

.....What *was* she hoping for from me?

“No, n-not really...” If anything, I was afraid of saying the wrong thing and making everything worse. But the moment the words were out of my mouth, I saw Petralka’s face darken. “Er, wh-what’s the matter?”

“There is no matter,” she said, and looked away from me. Ahh, she looked so cute when she did that—no! Now was not the time to be getting all moe-moe. Completely confused, I— “Hrghaahh!”

—made a bizarre sound when something jabbed me in the side. I glanced over and saw Hikaru-san: his eyes were still fixed ahead, but his elbow was pointed toward me. “The paper,” he said softly, not moving his eyes. “You have it, right?”

For an instant, I didn’t know what he was talking about, but then I realized. I took a step forward, ahead of Minori-san and Hikaru-san. So now I was standing there, but I still couldn’t quite bring myself to... you know. I glanced back at Hikaru-san as if to say, “Are we really doing this?” and he replied with a glare that seemed to communicate, “Hurry up and do like we said, you nastyotaku!”

“Ahh... ahem.” (Very long pause.) “Mic check...? One, two.” All too aware of Hikaru-san staring directly at my back—to say nothing of Eric-san and Rydel-san—I took a deep breath and continued. “Your Majesty, Petralka an Eldant the Third.” I deliberately tried to lower my voice a bit. *Stand up straight. Look important.*

“Hm...?” Now Petralka was looking at me again, intrigued by my unusual tone

and behavior. She was obviously wondering what was going on.

Were we sure this was going to work? Despite the question in my mind, I could still feel Hikaru-san's gaze; it was almost like a physical pressure. If I tried to run now, I wasn't sure he would let me make it out alive.

"You seem to be in fine spirits today, Your Majesty."

".....Huh?" Petralka blinked. God, that was cute.

"It never fails when I have the honor and pleasure of attending Your Majesty but my heart does dance in my chest. The glimmering cascade of your silver hair, the shining jewels of your— uh..."

What was I supposed to say next?

In a rush, I grabbed the piece of paper folded in a pocket of my pants. Hikaru-san's "script" was written on it. Crib notes, if you will, for what to say to Petralka. The night before, Hikaru-san had forced me to recite it more than a hundred times, so I'd been pretty sure I had it down by heart—but now I was sure glad I'd brought it. Trying to hide the piece of paper with my hand, I read unsteadily from my notes.

"The shining jewels of your eyes that remind me of emeralds—that was it! Emeralds. And I confess you do look even more magisterial...alal... ow!" I bit my tongue. It hurt. The only thing more painful, somehow, was Hikaru-san glaring daggers into my back. I could only assume he was wondering how I could forget my lines, how I could bite my tongue, and how badly he was going to thrash me when this was all over. But I couldn't help it! I'd never chatted up an empress before!

I was struggling to get out the next couple words when Petralka gave me her severest look. "Shinichi..."

"Ee-yeth?"

"We are sickened."

"That hurts—!" I exclaimed without thinking. Here I had practiced so hard! Yes, I knew I didn't sound as smooth as Prince Rubert! And yes, I agreed that Hikaru-san's script probably laid it on a little thick! But to just dismiss all of that

by saying you're *sickened*?! It's inhuman!

"Do you have a fever?"

"That hurts, too! I'm feeling completely fine and normal, thank you!"

If anything, her pitying glance hurt most of all. *Don't look at me like that!*

I somehow managed to suppress the feeling that I was going to break into a million pieces (it helped that I was terrified of Hikaru-san, whom I could practically feel vibrating with rage behind me) and desperately tried to remember how the rest of the speech went.

"Uh, a-anyway, Your Majesty's most reverent physiognomy is akin to a great opening blossom, and, uhh..."

"Hrm! Do not tell us..." Petralka seemed to be catching on. "Are you... a false Shinichi?!"

"What?"

"Reveal your true self!"

"What makes you think I'm an imposter?!"

"The real Shinichi would never say such things!"

Wait, how could she be so sure about that?!

"Just how awful do you think I am?!"

"Awful enough to exclaim 'IS THAT **REALLY** AN ARCHETYPAL LITTLE GIRL CHARACTER?!' upon our first meeting!"

"I told you, I'm *sorry* about that!"

"Now, tell us: are you a doppelgänger? An ot**rworld monster? Or a thief in disguise?! What have you done with the real Shinichi?!"

"I *am* the real Shinichi, Your Majesty!"

...and so it went. For a while longer, I tried my best to follow Hikaru-san's "guaranteed strategy for getting the Petralka ending," doing everything I could to heap praise on her.

But she pushed it all away with just those three words, "We are sickened."



Report over, we left the audience chamber. We all walked silently through Eldant Castle's huge hallways for a few minutes, but finally I stopped and looked at Hikaru-san.

"That was a total *failureeeee*!" I exclaimed, my eyes brimming with tears.

"I admit it was odd," Hikaru-san said, cocking his head. "It should have worked..."



I had followed Hikaru-san's script to the letter, working my way through the unfamiliar words of praise. Oh, how I had worked for those words! Though after Petralka's remark about being "sickened," the rest had been a desperate struggle. But I did it: the "Your voice is as charming as the twittering of a young bird." The "Your skin is as pale as the new-fallen snow." Even, after a beat at the very end, the "S-Sorry... I couldn't find the words to express your beauty, Petralka..." And...! And...!

Arrgh! Just remembering it makes my flesh crawl!

To have someone who's totally not even the least bit attractive suddenly spring that sort of talk on you—that *would* be sickening!

"B-But look, it was partly the way you delivered it," Hikaru-san said. He sounded hesitant. I guess the look on my face was scaring him. "Your voice was kind of cracking, and you kept sort of choking on the words..."

"Well, what was I supposed to do?! That stuff is embarrassing!"

"I can say it with no problem."

"That's because we're completely different *characters*! If you're so cool about saying whatever, then say, '*Awww, my bad, I guess your sweet little Hikaru got it all wrong. I'm so orry-say! ♪*' Say it!"

"Hrk?! What, do y-you have some sort of humiliation fetish? You want it right here, right now? Shinichi-san, I knew you had a filthy side, but—"

"*You forced me* to say all that awful stuff!" I wailed. No matter how strenuously I had objected...

"Point is," Minori-san said, "you wouldn't have to be an empress to think *that* display was suspicious. Shinichi-kun is right when he says it wasn't very in character."

"I knew you'd understand!"

Ahhh! If I had a hole, I would Lupi-dive into it as fast as I could!*

I was squirming with the thought of how dark my own Dark History was.

At that moment—the audience must have ended—I saw Eric-san and Rydel-

san coming down the hall toward us.

“Shinichi-dono!”

“What in the world happened?”

They approached at long strides, sounding less angry than bewildered, and a little afraid.

“*That* isn’t going to help us very much!”

“Have you forgotten you’re our only hope, Shinichi-dono?”

“Come hell or high water, we simply *need* you to convince Her Majesty of our plan...”

I was pretty well cornered by their intensity. “Y-Yeah, believe me, I know,” was all I could muster. But no matter how I looked at it, I could only see how impossible the situation was, how unimaginable, how badly they had chosen the guy to pin their hopes on. Did Petralka like me? Maybe, but that didn’t mean I could charge in there and suddenly start saying all these things I’d never said before in an effort to out-talk Rubert.

But so—who *was* the right person? I sure didn’t have any names. Seriously, what were we going to do here? As Eric-san and Rydel-san bore down on me with their troubles, I found myself at a complete loss.

“Shinichi-sama.” That was when a lone knight approached and called my name. “Her Majesty summons you.”

“Huh...?”

That was the last thing I had been expecting. Maybe the only thing that could leave me even more flummoxed than Eric-san and Rydel-san had.



The knight took me to a terrace overlooking the courtyard. I had been here before. Petralka sometimes liked to hold little tea parties here as a break from work. And in fact, the familiar tea set was sitting out on the terrace. A round, pad foot table hosted a set of white teacups and a three-tier tea stand holding a variety of delicate treats. It looked a lot like an English afternoon tea; the whole

thing oozed sophistication.

Normally the elegance of these things didn't bother me, but today I was freaked. I felt like I didn't belong here, like maybe it was even a crime for me to be here. The exact reason for that feeling had to do with the other participants. Namely Petralka, Garius, and Prince Rubert, who were all seated at the round table. Knights and maids stood nearby, along with a person who looked like one of Rubert's attendants, a woman with long hair tied into a single braid. Every one of them looked like the sort of person who was completely at home at a fancy tea party. That left me, the no-name commoner from nowhere, to agonize and wonder what I was doing.

"So you are here, Shinichi," Petralka said. She was smiling, as if she didn't notice my profound discomfort. Considering the "sickening" business just a few minutes earlier, I supposed I should be grateful that she was still willing to smile at me at all. "Hm? What of Minori and Hikaru?"

"Hikaru-san says he's coming —er, I mean, he is, uh, humbly on his way, Your Majesty."

Just before the knight had led me off, Hikaru-san remembered some kind of business he apparently had to take care of. He left me there saying he would be with me soon. I guessed he would join us before long. And as for our bodyguard...

"Minori-san... well, uh..." I glanced back. She was standing in the shadow of a pillar a short distance away, watching me intently. She was hardly even hiding, just not getting very close.

"Is something the matter?" Petralka asked, raising an eyebrow at Minori-san's stalker-esque pose. Fair enough.

"Uh... Let's just say she's not feeling very well..."

"Hrm. Isn't she indeed?"

"Er, but I mean, she's okay. Not awful or anything. She's here as my bodyguard, but she's keeping some distance, to make sure she doesn't get in the way..." Even I thought this excuse was a stretch. Petralka was looking dubiously at Minori-san (I wasn't sure she actually believed me). So were Garius

and Rubert.

Hmm... Okay, not the most plausible thing.

But this was what Minori-san had emphatically wanted.

"I'm sorry, Shinichi-kun. I just can't be in that place," she had said to me, blushing, when she discovered that we were being taken to a tea party not only with Petralka, but with Garius and Rubert. *"I mean, Garius-san and Prince Rubert in the same place?! Just thinking about it makes my heart race...!"*

In fact, it wasn't just the blushing. Everything about her looked different. Her breath was coming harder—maybe that was the real clue to what was going on. Frankly, it had me pretty worried.

"But you were okay earlier."

"We were in the audience chamber, and they weren't, like, right next to each other. I was able to survive somehow, but..."

"Is that... a needle?"

"I just need a little jab now and again. Right in the palm."

"Geez!"

What was she, a samurai trying to stave off sleep?

Was it really that bad for her? That was one fearsome fujoshi.

"But a tea party? A private function? No way! Watching Minister Garius and Prince Rubert chat with each other, all smiles... why just picturing it... just p-p-p... ahhh!"

And so we had decided to have Minori-san keep some space between herself and the boys. Which naturally meant not being very close to me, considering I was sitting at the same table.

"Don't you worry, though. I'll still keep an eye on you."

And she was definitely keeping an eye on something from the shadow of that pillar, but I didn't think it was me. I could see her gaze, intent and glimmering behind her glasses, and I was pretty sure she was looking at Garius and Rubert, who were sitting on either side of Petralka.

“...Hmm, very well,” Petralka said finally, apparently deciding not to press the matter. She nodded to a chair. “Shinichi, you sit there.” Directly across from her.

I didn’t say anything.

“What is the matter, Shinichi?”

“Er, nothing.”

Well, Garius and Rubert were to either side of her, and it was a round table, so I guess in some sense, everyone was sitting “across from her.” No reason to worry, right? *Right?*

That’s what I tried to tell myself as I sat down—and at that moment, who should appear but Hikaru-san.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said, coming quickly over to the table.

But he wasn’t alone. Right behind him were Loek and Romilda.

“Huh? What are—”

Hikaru-san seated himself beside me and whispered, “I asked them to come with me.”

So that’s what had been keeping him. But I still didn’t understand why he had gone to get the elf and the dwarf.

Hikaru-san gave me a pointed smile. “Call it... a little insurance.” Then he turned to Petralka and the others and said, “I hope you don’t mind? I don’t mean to have them sit with us, of course. Consider them like my attendants.” He glanced at the knights, and the woman with Prince Rubert. Each of us, myself included, had various guards and servants, so we could hardly tell Hikaru-san he was the only one who wasn’t allowed.

“We do not object, but...” Petralka glanced at Prince Rubert. I followed her look, and: Yikes.

My heart went to my throat. He still looked as good as ever, beautiful enough to make even another guy fall in love with him. You would almost think there wasn’t a look that could pass over his face that would make him less gorgeous. But by the same token, it made every little shift of his expression important.

And just now, his expression had shifted. He looked ever so slightly tense. Angry? Or...

He didn't speak right away, but I saw his blue eyes twitch in my direction. That seemed to help him get his calm smile back, and he said, "I don't mind at all." He sounded completely composed, not the least bit put out. As if the slip hadn't even happened.

"...Well, there you have it," Petralka said.

"My thanks," Hikaru-san replied with an elegant bow. Loek and Romilda stood behind him, but they didn't look very comfortable. I could tell the awkward moment hadn't been lost on them.

A maid approached noiselessly, setting a cup down in front of each of us and pouring tea. I watched the steam rise from the cup, somehow hardly able to stand it.

"Our apologies for summoning you so suddenly," Petralka said to me and Hikaru-san. It was as if the tea was our signal to begin. Incidentally, going clockwise from where Petralka was sitting, the seats belonged to Garius, Hikaru-san, me, and Rubert. There was a single vacant seat between me and the prince, originally intended for Minori-san.

"Allow me to reintroduce myself," the prince said. "I am Rubert Wollyn, and I am most interested in the activities of your 'Amutech.' It is because of me that Her Majesty Petralka brought you here so abruptly. I certainly hope I didn't trouble you."

"N-No, it's fine..." I said, feeling distinctly overwhelmed.

"In fact, it's an honor," Hikaru-san jumped in, as smoothly as if he were born to this. Out of the corner of my eye I could see that his face was a little bit stiff, but it didn't seem to keep him from rolling with the situation. Maybe that was what came of being a lifelong cosplayer: once he had a role to play, he could and would throw himself into it. "I am Ayasaki Hikaru of Amutech," he said.

"Oh, uh, and I'm Kanou Shinichi, Amutech's general manager," I added quickly. We both bowed our heads.

"So the two of you..." Rubert glanced at Petralka and Garius as if to seek

confirmation, then said, "...are the ones who are said to have come to our world from a land that cannot be reached by carriage or by boat, no matter how long the voyage."

"Um... yes."

That seemed like a bit of a mouthful—where we came from, we might have just used the one simple word *isekai*, but I guess when you didn't have so much as the concept of sci-fi, you had to resort to more roundabout expressions. Granted, we'd arrived here via hyperspace wormhole; it wasn't like we warped to lightspeed or something.

"Mm. It sounds as remote as heaven or hell."

"B-Believe me, it's a lot less interesting than that."

"I beg to differ. Everything I hear suggests a country of profoundly advanced culture, along with objects that are equivalent in function to magic without actually *being* magical."

"Umm..." How was I going to explain this one? For that matter, was it even acceptable for me to just go chatting away about Earth or about Japan? Zewelberich was obviously aware that we had come from another world, but I had no idea how much else they knew, and that was the problem.

Rubert interrupted my search for the right words: "Kanou Shinichi, is that right?" A gentle smile played over his exquisite face. Even I could tell that it wasn't spontaneous; he had put it there on purpose. *Don't worry*, he seemed to be saying, *I won't bite*. Then he said quietly, "I'm very... interested in the two of you." He sounded sweet, sultry, like he thought he was in some kind of romance series.

And just then—

Bong.

There was a dull sound from behind us. I whipped around to find Minori-san with her head shoved against the pillar.

Ahhh...

"What is Minori doing?" Petralka asked.

“I—I guess her forehead itched? Maybe?” I said with a forced laugh. The needle must not have been enough. I admired her commitment, but if we didn’t find some way to get her out of here, she was going to break her own skull.

“The culture of one land certainly can seem inexplicable to the people of another,” Hikaru-san said, moving promptly to redirect the conversation. “We don’t have any magic in our world, and we don’t have elves and dwarves either.”

“None at all?”

“Not one. No beast people, no lizardmen. Just humans and animals,” Hikaru-san explained to a sincerely surprised Prince Rubert. “And dragons? They exist in our stories, but nowhere else.”

“Hoh...” Rubert nodded, intrigued. “A society consisting entirely of humans, you say...?” His lips edged upward into a smile. He could have been a painting: *The Young Prince Imagines a Land Unknown*. Then he said, “Wonderful indeed,” and I found myself caught on that. I felt a prickle, like a thorn. It was— “Where do you live now?” Rubert asked.

“Pretty close,” I said. “Petralka... uh, an Eldant the Third—Her Majesty—has generously provided us a mansion to live in.” I had been just about to do my normal thing and call Petralka by nothing but her first name, but I managed to save it by appending her entire name and title. I suspected it wouldn’t do to refer to the empress in such familiar terms in front of Prince Rubert. I seemed to remember Prime Minister Zahar saying something about how the only people who could call the empress by her first name were her family, people as close as family—and her betrothed.

“Right now there’s me, Hikaru-san, and our bodyguard Minori-san, and then there’s our half-elf maid, our lizardman gardener and maid, plus—”

Suddenly I stopped. There it was again. That stiffness, passing over Rubert’s face for an instant. That look, along with the weird prickling I’d felt earlier, made me pretty sure: it was contempt. Disgust toward demi-humans.

Zwelberich had very advanced magic, but also what you might call a human supremacist culture. Humans stood at the top of the social hierarchy, and demi-humans like elves and dwarves were subject to discrimination or worse. It’s not

like Eldant was completely free of discrimination toward demi-humans, but it sounds like it was way worse in Zwelberich.

I thought back to how shocked Myusel and Brooke had seemed the first time I had explained that I wanted to eat at the same table with them. If that was how things were here, I could only imagine what it was like to be a demi-human in Zwelberich. Maybe it made Prince Rubert's hair stand on end to think someone would live under the same roof as a half-elf or lizardman. Apparently it was so repugnant to him that it caused his perfect mask to slip for a bare instant.

After the slightest beat, Rubert said, "It sounds very lively. What a pleasure." The tension was already gone from his face. This prince seemed to have more self-control than even Minori-san. In the Eldant Empire, there were elves and dwarves in positions of power, even if not very many, and Rubert knew better than to allow any of his distaste for them to show through.

When I looked closely, I realized that all his attendants, as well as all the knights and maids around him, were human. The attendants were one thing, but the fact that there wasn't a demi-human even among the maids must have been a deliberate act of consideration on the part of Petralka and her aides.

"A society consisting entirely of humans... Wonderful indeed."

I thought of what Rubert had said a moment earlier. He had praised the fact that our world had no demi-humans—as if to say he didn't need them in his own. If this was how an ambassador acted in a foreign state, I could only imagine how he behaved in Zwelberich, where he wasn't expected to so much as pay lip service to demi-human dignity.

In my own world, there were plenty of cases of humans starting wars with other humans over differences in religion or language. Sometimes large groups of people from other tribes, or nations, or religions were gathered up and attacked or expelled. And those were fellow human beings. Just think what would happen if the people in question literally belonged to another species.

If the dominant worldview in Zwelberich were to spread to Eldant, the local demi-humans would find themselves in a storm of persecution far worse than anything they were experiencing now. At worst, we might even end up with a war between humans and demi-humans, or some kind of genocide—the mass

killing of demi-humans. It was all too clear why people like Eric-san and Rydel-san would be worried about a marriage between Petralka and Prince Rubert.

There was an awkward moment of silence as the conversation came to a halt. All of us around the table sipped from our teacups or admired the neatly arranged snacks.

Then, pale fingers extended. Two hands just happened to reach for the same snack, and met in the middle, brushing against each other.

One of the hands belonged to Prince Rubert. The other, to Garius.

Garius pulled his hand back almost as if he had been burned, but Rubert, for his part, only narrowed his eyes in a pained smile. Garius seemed to be barely keeping himself together, but Rubert looked completely composed. Maybe he had deliberately reached for the same snack as Garius, knowing this would happen.

The two of them seemed to be enveloped in a space all their own. There was tension, yes, but no shadow of hostility or contempt. *What's this...?* I could practically see the rose petals dancing through the air behind them, but... that was my imagination, right? It had to be. Because the alternative would be frightening.

Suddenly, I felt a rush of sympathy for Petralka, sitting between the two men. If I had been in her place, surrounded on all sides by their little moment, I probably would have been writhing with discomfort. But Petralka looked on calmly as if nothing was happening.

Bam. Bam bam bam bam.

I looked back at five quick rapping sounds, to find Minori-san down on all fours, pounding her fists against the floor. Ahh. The atmosphere had fired the BL flames within her, and she was struggling to contain them. At least it was her fists she was slamming against the ground, and not her head. That seemed significantly less lethal. But I was still kind of worried about the terrace tiles...

Petralka, Garius, and Prince Rubert had all noticed Minori-san's behavior, too, and were regarding her with perplexity. This was bad, I figured, in a number of ways.

“Hikaru-san, what do we do?” I whispered.

“Let me handle it,” he whispered back, and then snapped his fingers. Loek and Romilda, who had been waiting behind him as if for exactly this moment, rushed over to Minori-san.

“P-Pardon me, Minori-sensei,” Loek said, pinning her arms behind her and pulling her to her feet. That was when I finally understood why Hikaru-san had brought them along. They were going to play the part Elvia had not long ago. Loek wasn’t exactly a bodybuilder, but together with Romilda, who was so much stronger than she looked, the two of them would be able to overpower Minori-san if the need arose. There was just one little problem...

“Ahh...” Loek, still holding Minori-san’s arms, didn’t move. Wait... he was gazing into the sky with tears streaming down his face.

“T-To think that the day would come when I would be so... so close to Minori-sensei! I am—ahh! I am truly—!”

“Cut the creepiness and let’s go!” Romilda, apparently worried Loek would stand there forever, stepped hard on his foot.

“Hrrgh?!” Loek let go of Minori-san, crouching over his wounded foot. Romilda may have been small, but she was a dwarf. She probably had more muscle than I did, and was certainly stronger. Not to mention that dwarven footwear was equivalent to what we would have called steel-toed work boots. So getting stepped on by a dwarf was a little bit like putting your foot in a steel press.

“Wh-What’s wrong with you?!” Loek wailed. I did feel bad for him.

“I said, cut it out!” Romilda exclaimed, then grabbed Loek and Minori-san both by the scruff of the neck, one with each hand, and dragged them away. Wow. Go dwarves. They might not have had the reflexes of a werewolf, but for sheer strength, there was probably no one stronger in the whole Eldant Empire.

In any event, that was three fewer people on the terrace.

“It seems Minori-san isn’t feeling well,” Hikaru-san said smoothly. “Those two will see to it that she gets some rest.”

I didn't think anyone was going to be fooled by that excuse, but he delivered it so confidently that nobody was quite willing to contradict him. And then he segued neatly into the next part of the conversation: "By the way, Your Highness Rubert. You recently proposed marriage to Her Majesty. Might I ask which aspects of the empress you find most attractive?"

There was a beat, in which Rubert blinked and looked at Hikaru-san with a slight widening of the eyes. He probably hadn't expected that particular question, and certainly not from a rank outsider like an Amutech employee. Nonetheless, though, his smile quickly came back. "What I find attractive about her? Well, it must be said that real marriages so frequently have but little to do with the preferences or feelings of those involved."

"Gracious. You mean your proposal was purely political? That you don't love Her Majesty at all?" Hikaru-san feigned surprised. Geez! Talk about provocative. I was starting to break out in a cold sweat, and I was only watching. He was dancing with infuriating Prince Rubert, wasn't he?

"Now, now, don't be hasty. Political it may be, but it is politics that now allows me to join myself to the unparalleled beauty that is Her Majesty. A happier chance I can scarcely imagine." He sounded so smooth. *This* was courtship. "For I've never known a woman more beautiful. If it were only the composed cast of her features, well, perhaps some other fair lady might offer the same. But the nobility of her bearing and the radiance of her wisdom make Her Majesty a rare creature indeed. Her lustrous silver hair—to see it is to wish one could take it in one's hands in sweet caress. But even her shimmering tresses pale before the splendor of her eyes, green emeralds lit from within by the effulgence of her spirit. *That* is what I find most attractive about Her Majesty."

Okay, so I was pretty impressed that he could say all that at the drop of a hat... and with a straight face. I noticed Petralka's chest puff out a little, pleased to be showered with compliments, even if they did seem a little over the top. And then I thought she glanced in my direction.

Huh? What?

I blinked, not understanding the meaning of her look, at which point Petralka

frowned and turned away. Was she... mad?

“Have I convinced you that my affections are more than mere talk?” Rubert asked.

“I daresay you have,” Hikaru-san said. “Please pardon my most impudent question.” They were both smiling at each other.

I watched them—and felt something nag at me. I totally agreed that Petralka’s hair was beautiful. And her eyes were definitely like jewels, clear and piercing; when she looked right at me, it always made my heart pound. The way she picked up Japanese in a flash, and the simple fact that she dealt with being empress at her age, both showed how smart she was.

But... how could I put this? If I had been in Prince Rubert’s place, I don’t think “beautiful” is the word I would have chosen to express what was great about Petralka. The Petralka I knew was outgoing, kind of boyish, selfish sometimes, and totally committed to everything she did. She was the cutest girl I knew. If you pressed me, I might even have called her lovely... Wouldn’t those be better things to compliment?

Or was this just a case of the interpreter rings not catching the nuance of what Rubert was saying? For that matter, did Rubert know how sensitive Petralka was about her youthful looks? Was he just being considerate?

Or one more possibility: was I overthinking everything?

But then, as I finally wrenched my gaze away from Petralka...

“Oh...”

There they were. Silver hair and emerald eyes of unparalleled beauty.

That was it: the hair, the eyes. They weren’t those of Petralka. They had to belong to someone else. Someone else who was sitting right here, someone who could never be described as “cute” or “lovely,” but only as truly beautiful.

Garius en Cordobal.

I realized he was looking at Rubert, and when I glanced over, I saw that Rubert was looking at him, too.

The knight, Garius, and the prince, Rubert. Exchanging a single, brief glance.

But that made it all the more meaningful, all the more important that I noticed it.

Just a second...

Maybe all the stuff Rubert had just said—maybe he wasn't really talking about Petralka at all, but about Garius. No, there was no *maybe* about it. That had to be it. Garius being Garius, he was completely expressionless, but there was a faint flush of what might have been embarrassment on his cheeks. He had the same pale skin as Petralka, so a blush stood out pretty obviously.

Hmmm. I was starting to get a sense of what was going on here. I looked back at Petralka, who was just reaching out for one of the snacks. Maybe it was one of her favorites, because there was an innocent joy on her face; it really was adorable. When she noticed me looking at her, though, she quickly drew her hand back and frowned again, then put on a prim and proper expression before reaching delicately for the snack. It definitely looked appropriate for an empress, but to me it was all too obvious that she was putting on an act.

Petralka had lost her parents to a political struggle at a very young age. She'd had to force herself to grow quickly into the role of empress. I knew what a heavy burden she was under—and so it stung to see her forcing herself to act grown-up.

Silently, I looked back at Prince Rubert. Honestly, he really was a good-looking guy. Nothing to complain about. He was relaxed, gentle, like a prince from some storybook. His whole... I don't know. Vibe? Aura? Whatever it was, it seemed worlds apart from a son of the common folk like myself. Rubert was more than qualified to be the husband of an empress. He was literally born to it.

And yet even still, I couldn't forget the look of disgust that had passed over his face for an instant a little while ago. It was all the more startling because he was so beautiful. Because he looked so kind. And maybe he really was. But I had to guess that kindness didn't extend to demi-humans.

What's more, I assumed he didn't know the real Petralka. He only knew her as an empress. Did he know the way she puffed out her cheeks like a little kid when she got angry? The innocent sparkle in her eyes when she discovered something new and delightful? The way the simplest thing could bring a great

big shining smile to her face? I bet he didn't.

Yes, I had gotten myself socked by saying something totally rude the very first time I met Petralka—but on reflection, maybe that moment was what had allowed me to see past the imperial mask she wore.

Anyway, Prince Rubert may have proposed to Petralka, but I got the feeling he didn't see her as an individual, a young woman with her own feelings and goals and desires. Even if he really meant all that stuff he'd said earlier for Petralka, and I doubted it, almost anyone who was a smooth enough talker could have come up with that just by looking at the empress. It was almost a social nicety.

That was a political marriage for you. Obviously, I wasn't going to sit here and say that every match had to be 100% love, but in my own humble opinion, being married to someone who saw you for your political position more than as a human being... I couldn't imagine Petralka could ever be truly happy that way.

And so I finally said: "I disagree. I don't think those are Petralka's best features."

A collection of startled gazes settled on me. Prince Rubert, of course, and also Hikaru-san, but even Petralka was looking at me with wide eyes.

"Shinichi...?" she asked.

This wasn't just about what Eric-san and Rydel-san and Matoba-san had all asked me to do. I, me personally, didn't believe in Petralka's getting married to Prince Rubert. I objected.

"Listen to me. I think Petralka's best feature..." The empress turned an expectant gaze upon me, whereupon I nodded emphatically and clenched a fist to underscore my point. "...is what a total loli she is, obviously!"

".....Huh?" Petralka said finally.

Hikaru-san and Garius sat frozen, transfixed as if by an onrushing avalanche, but I didn't so much care about their reactions. Instead I stared straight at the wide-eyed Prince Rubert and went on without a pause: "Especially that chest! Smooth as you like! The smaller the boobs, the bigger the deal! And it's not just the bust! It's how even at seventeen, she looks like she could pass for an

elementary-schooler! What rare quality! Do you hear me? Do you understand? She's a legal loli! Under Japanese law, you can get *married* at sixteen, get it?! And we're talking about someone who legitimately goes around using the royal 'we'! It's like they took every moe ingredient they could find and threw it all together in one girl! Unbelievable!! Petralka-san is truly an angel!"

To conclude my speech I pounded the table, breathing hard. I could see Hikaru-san with his head in his hands, but that didn't matter to me now.

"*Shiiiiiiiichiiii!*" Petralka was glaring at me with a face that would have frightened a demon. The next second, there was a crash as her chair tipped over, and she rushed around the table at me. "Who do you think you are calling a loliiiiii!"

That adorable, pale fist connected with my face.

"Gurf!"

Petralka attacks! Shinichi fainted!

"Who is *smooth*?!"

Still not satisfied, Petralka jumped on top of me, grabbed me by the collar, and began shaking me violently.

Oof! That's surprisingly effective...

"We will be damned if you ever, ever learn to measure your pronouncements and not say whatever comes into your foolish head!"

"Oof! No! I really—I just wanted—Prince Rubert to know—the best—thing about you!"

"The bigger the deal,' indeed!"

"I swear it's true!"

"And when we *know* you are always looking at Myusel, or Minori, or Elvia!"

"I told you—big is good—but small—small is great!"

"Then you should pay more—"

"More what?"

“More nothing! Silence!” Petralka finally let go of me, but she threw in a headbutt for good measure. I lay there sandwiched between her and the floor, groaning with pain.

I could hear Hikaru-san sigh somewhere above me, out of patience. “What are you doing, Shinichi-san?”

“Me? I’m just trying to communicate what’s best about Petralka... in my own way...”

“Best, hmph! You are the most impudent, most insolent person, Shinichi!” Petralka finally moved away from me, turning to a wide-eyed Rubert. “This Shinichi has been a study in effrontery since the moment we met. His first words to me were, ‘IS THAT **REALLY** AN ARCHETYPAL LITTLE GIRL CHARACTER?!’ What fool bursts out with such a thing to an empress?!”

Was it my imagination, or—despite her tirade—was there a hint of merriment in Petralka’s expression? She stomped and fumed, but I could see Garius shrug with a wan smile, as if to say, “They’re always like this.”



About half an hour later, the little tea party ended. We left the terrace and headed down a hallway, where we joined up with Loek’s and Romilda’s fathers, who had been waiting for us. We went to a side room the men had reserved for us, where we intended to debrief about the progress we were making. Minori-san, Loek, and Romilda were already in the room when we got there.

“Sorry Loek, sorry Romilda,” I said to the elf and dwarf who had helped remove my berserk bodyguard. “Thanks for your help.”

“Don’t mention it! I’m always happy to help you, Sensei!” Romilda beamed at me. She might like to pick a fight with Loek now and again, but she really was a good kid at heart.

Then I turned to Hikaru-san and said, “You knew that was going to happen?”

“Eh, I had an inkling,” Hikaru-san shrugged. He was looking in the direction of Minori-san, who had a lopsided grin on her face and was muttering to herself. “I know just what they’re saying right now,” she rambled. “*Jealous? I know it*

must burn you up to see me making nice with Petralka.’ ‘Feh! I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ ‘Hee hee! How I enjoy getting you all out of sorts.’”

“Oh, absolutely!” someone responded enthusiastically. It was Loek, standing there beside Minori-san. He looked like he was having fun—but did he really understand what she was saying? I know they say love is blind, but is it deaf, too? I was genuinely impressed that he could encounter Minori-san in that state of mind and not go running the other way in terror. Maybe he just didn’t make very good choices. I could only hope for his sake that this elf didn’t stray too far off the path of sanity.

Ahem. Anyway.

“Tell us, tell us! Did it go well?” Eric-san said.

“Well? Well...” I gave them my best ambiguous smile. At the tea party, I had really tried my hardest to speak up for Petralka, but all I’d managed to do was make her angry. *Well* probably wasn’t the word I would use to describe how it had gone. Then again, I could hardly just chortle, “Nope! Screwed it all up! ♪” Eric-san and Rydell-san’s grim expressions made that obvious.

“Yes. On the whole, I think it went quite nicely.”

“...Huh?”

“Did it indeed?! Wonderful! We knew we could count on you, Shinichi-dono!”

The dads were grinning and sharing looks of huge relief, but I was too busy staring at Hikaru-san in complete shock to appreciate it. I brought my hand up to cover my mouth and whispered to Hikaru-san so the dads wouldn’t hear us.

“Uh, Hikaru-san?”

“Yes, Shinichi-san?”

“Exactly what happened back there that you would describe as going *quite nicely*? Petralka was angrier than a swarm of bees!”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say she was angry,” Hikaru-san said, sounding perfectly confident.

“You... wouldn’t?”

“I have to confess, Her Majesty didn’t look thrilled with my little script. But it seems like if the words come from *your* heart, Shinichi-san, then it doesn’t matter what words they are—they’ll reach her. Love does make fools of us all, I suppose. It was silly of me to think a rehearsed come-on was the right way to go.”

“Huh? What? I’m not following.”

Hikaru-san looked at me with exasperation, then finally said, “I have no interest in taking the time to explain it right now. Just take my word for it.”

His word. Great.

But Hikaru-san refused to give me any more hints. Instead, he turned back to the dads and said, “I’m chagrined to admit that the script I gave Shinichi-san didn’t work. But it seems error has been the handmaiden of good fortune today, and everything worked out to our advantage.”

“Ah! We are so grateful!” Eric-san and Rydell-san said, nodding. I really *didn’t* understand what was going on... but Hikaru-san usually knew what he was talking about. And it didn’t look like I was going to get anything else out of him for the time being.

“Now, obviously, I don’t think we’ve scuppered this wedding talk with just one little tea party. We have to stay on the alert. And how Regent Cordobal feels about the match will be of the utmost importance, as well.”

“He’s in love with Prince Rubert, obviously!” our resident fujoshi broke in.

Hikaru-san and I both understood that trying to talk to Minori-san in this condition wasn’t going to get us anywhere, so we tried our best to ignore her, though that didn’t get us very far, either.

“If we could bring Minister Cordobal to our side, it would help our cause immensely.”

“Those two are a *complete* item! You can tell just by looking at them!”

“Might you try feeling him out on the matter?”

“Oh yes, *feel* him! The virginal sweetness of Garius-san! I used to be so sure that Garius-san was a top, but just look at that expression! That’s the face of a

bottom if you ever saw one, isn't it?!"

"But if he says he agrees with the match, that would only make things worse..."

"Prince Rubert *has* to be the top! That easy smile! The look that says, *I have you in the palm of my hand!* That face is top, top, top!"

"Stop, stop, *stop!* You filthy, fermenting WAC!" We were never going to be able to have a conversation at this rate! "And that last thing you said is so dangerous!"

What did it even mean for a face to "be top"?! If it *ever* got out that Minori-san was using Prince Rubert as fodder for her hot man-on-man fantasies, they could probably execute her for offending royalty. Maybe Minori-san had started to forget about the danger, considering how indulgent Garius was toward BL stories.

"That's enough of that!" I said, then looked toward Rydel-san and Eric-san. I didn't expect them to let any of this out of this room, but there was still always a risk in letting Eldant people see this twisted side of Minori-san. "At least take that ring off your finger!" I instructed. That would at least stop the dads from understanding what she was saying. Although Loek and Romilda, who had learned some Japanese at school, might still pick something up.

"Oh, boo hoo hoo!" Minori-san griped. Maybe she was upset to have been interrupted when she was on such a roll. But nonetheless, she took the ring off.

Huh, cute. Minori-san already had such baby-like features that a bit of a tantrum from her was sort of adorable. But forget about that for a moment.

"I'll have you know, I'm right, though!" Minori-san went on. "The fact that another BL lover just like me was stalking them proves it!" She clenched her fist.

"Another BL lover?" I said.

Minori-san chuckled triumphantly. "When Garius-san and Prince Rubert were meeting, all alone, she was there, hiding in the shadows not far away."

".....Huh? It was just the two of them?" So how did she know about this?

"Here, look," Minori-san said, then proudly showed me her phone. On the

screen was a video showing one of the castle hallways. And indeed, you could see Garius and Rubert facing each other, no one else around. The video must have been taken with a wide-angle lens, because it showed a fairly large area, but the picture was slightly distorted.

“How did you—”

“I have cameras set up all over the castle.”

“Oh, that explains it. Wait, *what?!?*” I exclaimed. “That’s sneak-shooting! And when did this start, anyway?!”

“Pretty early on,” Minori-san said, with no evident sense that she had done anything wrong. “Matoba-san asked me to set up a video surveillance system so we could see how the Eldant side felt about us. They’re watching us, too. Fair’s fair.”

Come to think of it, I did remember a bunch of weird owl-cyclops-things—magical creatures or sprites or something; I didn’t really understand—that had staked out our mansion in the early days.

Anyway, thank God I’d had Minori-san take off her ring.

“So, get a look at this person.” Minori-san zoomed in on a woman hiding in the shadows, apparently watching the two men.

“Is that...?”

“Uh-huh. One of Prince Rubert’s attendants.”

She was right: I recognized the woman from the tea party earlier. Her long hair was tied behind her head.

“You don’t think she’s just there to guard him?”

“But she’s always, like, looking at the two of them. I mean *really* looking.”

“Uh... okay.” So this woman was rotten, too.

“Trust me. I could be friends with that lady, for sure. Gosh, I wanna talk to her!” Minori-san clasped her hands in front of her chest, eyes sparkling. She looked like a young girl having an innocent daydream, but inside that ample bosom, I knew, beat a dark heart. Her smile was creeping its way from ear to

ear.

“Mi—Minori-sensei! If it is talk, I will any time with you!”

“Hoo... hoo hoo hoo!”

Loek had apparently picked up on the words *talk with*, and tried to turn it into an opportunity for himself, but his words couldn’t reach Minori-san anymore. Shame for him.

“Minori-sensei, you look so funny when you are all excited,” Romilda laughed from beside the two blinking dads. I was actually pretty impressed that Romilda was able to cope with Minori-san in full fujoshi mode with just the word “funny.”

“Ahh, my chest is almost bursting! Oh, the pain... to moe until I can moe no more... it hurts...!”

I pried my attention away from Minori-san and looked over at Hikaru-san. Our eyes met, and we both let out long sighs.



I stepped out of the room, leaving everyone in there with Minori-san, still in her crazed state.

“Okay, where was the bathroom from here again?”

To be honest, I was only partially answering the call of nature. Partly I just wanted to get away from a conversation that didn’t seem to be going anywhere—at least nowhere I could see. I wanted to get the proverbial breath of fresh air.

I’d been to the castle often enough by now to have a general idea of where the bathrooms were. On the first floor, you could even take a pretty good guess where they were based simply on the way the rest of the building was designed.

I went down the hallway, bowing to the occasional knight or bureaucrat that I passed.

“Hm...?” Over in a corner, hiding in the shadows... I thought I saw someone.

“Is that...?”

She was small of stature, so she could hide almost anywhere. But one thing she couldn't conceal was that long silver hair. It was as bright as if it had been made of real silver. I knew two people with hair like that—but only one was short.

“Pe—”

I almost called out to her, but then I stopped myself. I had left her royally peeved just a few minutes ago, and anyway, Petralka thought she was hiding. The polite thing to do would probably be just to walk past. Even if I did sort of wonder what the Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire was doing here of all places. I was just pretending to walk nonchalantly by when— “Shinichi!” Petralka called my name. I reflexively turned, and our eyes met. She raised an eyebrow. “Hrm. What are you doing in this place?”

“That's my line! Er... I mean, uh...”

Just for a beat, Petralka watched me struggle for words. Then she gestured me over as if a thought had suddenly occurred to her. “Shinichi, come here.”

“Huh? But—”

“Do not argue, just come here.” A hint of annoyance entered her voice.

Oof. That was a direct order from the empress. No running away from this one. I went over and joined Petralka in the shadowy corner. I was never going to be completely hidden here, but there wasn't much I could do about it.

“Shinichi...” Petralka said, almost in a whisper. “All of... *that*... earlier. Is that how you really feel?”

“Guh? No, look, I just—” I scrambled for something to say. It looked like Petralka still hadn't forgotten about the whole “loli” business. This was bad news... “Your Majesty, you were completely within your rights to be upset with me, uh, most honorably...” I braced myself to get slugged at any time.

Had I meant what I'd said? Sure I had. Even I realized maybe I had gone a little overboard with the way I'd said it, but I really did think Petralka was cute, and I still thought the way I had put it got a lot closer to what was in my heart than

some fill-in-the-blank compliments you could give to anyone. Even if... well, okay, I had gone over the top. Yes. Sorry.

“I promise I wasn’t making fun of you,” I said. “Petralka, I think... I mean, really...”

“Is that so?” Petralka asked after a moment, nodding. And then she gave me the slightest smile.

Huh...?

“H-Hey, what...? Are you...?”

Petralka studied a spot on the floor as she said shyly, “Let it be said... that we were... in f-fact, happy to hear it. Ahem.”

Wait, so... not mad?

I looked at Petralka in surprise, and she went on, “Although your grotesque display earlier remains sickening.”

“That hurts, Your Majesty...” I grant that it was the sort of thing a passing policeman would have arrested me for! Really! But I was genuinely trying to express what I truly... You know what? Never mind about that right now.

“We, being who we are, have forgiven you for it. But we warn you against saying such things to any other woman. You would be lucky simply to find yourself in her ill graces, and not on the end of her sword.”

“S-So you’re saying you’ll let it go?”

“We will let it go. You should be grateful to us for our magnanimous and merciful nature.”

“S-Sure...”

Maybe Petralka really did understand that I had been sincerely trying to compliment her, in my own way.

Geez... I knew it was way, way late to be thinking about this, but what must Prince Rubert have thought about my little speech? What if he took my attempt to set him straight about Petralka’s virtues as a declaration of war? What if it sounded like I was saying, “*I know her better than you*”?

Okay, so maybe there was no *what if* about it. It had been pretty clear that my message was: “You don’t understand! You don’t understand at all!!” But it really was because I wanted him to know Petralka better. I thought Petralka needed someone around her who would fight for her not as the empress, but as a young woman. And if Prince Rubert didn’t understand that, then I thought he should withdraw his proposal. That’s what I had wanted to get across with my outburst.

I wasn’t out to interfere with Petralka’s marriage. But if she was going to get married, I wanted it to make her happy. Sure, I would be sad if she got married and had to distance herself from me. But if it really made her happy, then any match would absolutely have my blessing.

Er... what am I saying? It’s almost like I...

“Shinichi?” Petralka was giving me a curious look. Right in the face. With her face. So close to my face... So close... *Too close, Petralka!* With the two of us hiding in the shadows, practically shoulder to shoulder, I could almost feel her body heat, the breath from her lips. Somehow, that made me extremely shy.

Why, though? She’d sat on my knees to read manga before, so why was I getting all anxious now?

“B-By the way,” I said, “why are we hiding?” I hoped the question would keep her from noticing how nervous I was.

A frown passed over Petralka’s face. “There is too much talk. All around us, it is nothing but chatter.”

“Talk? Chatter?”

“After... what happened. Our retainers descended upon us, jabbering about every minor detail of this betrothal to Prince Rubert.”

“Ahh...”

That’s right—Loek and Romilda’s parents had said something about trying to persuade Petralka themselves. They weren’t the only demi-human ministers, and they were probably all getting together to try to stop Petralka from marrying Rubert. But the whole fact that they were so desperate to stop the marriage implied that there were at least some people among the human

members of the court who were eager to see it go on. Eldant and Zwelberich had a history of intermarriage, and it seemed likely that some princess of Zwelberich somewhere along the line had brought some of her own ministers with her to Eldant. They'd put down roots and now naturally advocated for continued closeness between the two nations.

Hmmm...

"It was all too much, and we fled." Petralka sounded like she might heave a giant sigh at any moment.

"Um, Petralka?"

"What?"

"Are you going to marry Prince Rubert?"

"Well..." She seemed a bit lost for words; she looked away from me. Was she embarrassed? No, maybe not. Just for a second, I thought Petralka really liked Prince Rubert, and was seriously thinking about marrying him. But this seemed like... the opposite.

Obviously, it wasn't that she hated Rubert. She was just setting aside her own feelings to figure out what she should do as Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire. The fate of her nation rode on her choice: should she form a marital connection, or not? At just seventeen years of age, she was being asked to make a life-altering decision, not even based on what she wanted, but on what would be best for her country. Not based on whom she loved, but on who would be the most beneficial to her nation. It was a huge choice to have to make. And a terrible one.

"...Say, Shinichi," Petralka began, as if she couldn't take the silence between us any longer.

"Yeah?"

"There is something we wish to ask you."

"Ask me?" What could she possibly want to ask me? "I don't know if I'll be much help, but... ask away." Even though I didn't think I had much to offer an empress by way of advice.

“Ahem, well then... Mn. Ahem.” She cleared her throat delicately, and then, without looking at me, she said, “Suppose there was—hypothetically, you understand—but suppose there was a person whom one could absolutely not marry for reasons of... position.”

“Position?” Did she mean like in *Romeo and Juliet*? Like, someone you couldn’t marry because they belonged to an enemy group?

“This person and you... by no means do you hate each other, in fact... you think rather well of each other. Or... or so you assume, at least...” Suddenly, Petralka sounded a lot less confident.

“What are you getting at, Petralka...?” All this stuff about “thinking well of each other” and “assuming.” It was sounding less hypothetical by the minute. In fact, it sounded like she had someone in mind. Like maybe...

“We are not talking about ourselves, you understand! We are asking for a friend!”

“Oh, uh, sure.” I nodded vigorously, deeply relieved for some reason. So this was all about some friend of hers, after all. Was it normal to blush so hard when you were asking about a friend’s situation, though? I guess it just went to show how innocent Petralka was when it came to love. Gosh, she was sweet.

...Hey, wait a second.

A friend?

Could she be talking about... Garius? Prince Rubert fit the bill for someone he absolutely couldn’t marry. Was Petralka trying to get my advice about the two of them? Of course! Since Rubert had proposed to *her*, Petralka couldn’t very well go to Garius about this. Instead, she wanted the opinion of a total outsider—namely, me. So why couldn’t she just come out and say she was asking about Garius? I guess she’d been a little embarrassed to let me know she was worried about him. Petralka tried to act strong whenever she could, and this was probably part of that. Gosh! What a sweetie, being so considerate about her cousin like that...

As I was busy moe-ing it up, Petralka went on, “For reasons of position, the two absolutely cannot marry, but meanwhile by this person’s side there is

another—even if they do not have, ahem, any kind of *special* relationship as of yet.”

Ahh. This other person had to be Petralka herself. Rubert and Garius had feelings for each other, but for reasons of state, Rubert had proposed to Petralka.

“Insofar as this other person is of perfectly acceptable position, that person would make the better partner...” Petralka was a woman, which meant getting married to her was, you know, *possible*, and that alone made her highly preferable to Garius. Not to mention that when it came to imperials and royals getting married, there were matters of succession to consider. “And suppose that this were a source of great anxiety to you... and that you began to think that you had to give in, to give up. But then... there were also moments when you believe the person you long for may not... may not dislike you; indeed, may very much have feelings for you.”

An obvious reference to what Prince Rubert had said at the tea party—pretending to compliment Petralka while secretly describing Garius.

“What would you do?”

“Good question...”

That was one seriously twisted love triangle, I thought. Petralka didn’t say anything, but watched me intently as she waited for my answer. She must have been *really* worried about Garius, because her face was beet red. In fact, she almost looked like she might cry... *Uh, er, Your Majesty? I know I’m supposed to be a neutral third party here, but... when you look at me like that, I start to get this funny feeling...*

Okay, the first thing to do was to calm down. *Calm down, Kanou Shinichi!* We weren’t talking about me. I wasn’t involved. I could be detached and rational about this. I took a deep breath, trying to stop my heart from pounding in my ears.

Who knows what Petralka thought of me as I stood there silently trying to decide what to say? Finally she blinked, looked at the ground, and said, “It has gone unremarked all this time. Perhaps it would be best to continue that way.”

Mm. That sounded like something straight out of a romance manga: better to keep it inside than to confess your feelings and screw everything up or get hurt.

“Of course, even a moment’s thought about one’s position makes clear that things were never going to go on forever as they had. But these recent events have made certain decisions far more pressing...” She almost sounded like she was talking to herself. Suddenly she stopped and exclaimed, “W-We do not speak of ourself, you understand?!”

“Y-Yeah, I got that. I understand!”

“Indeed? We urge you to keep it in mind.”

“Right, I’m—I’m keeping it...”

I nodded almost frantically, but Petralka continued to glare at me for a moment longer. Why did she look sullen?



Oof... The way you stare up at me like that is just too adorable, Your Majesty. It makes me think all sorts of wrong things, so I wish you'd stop. I mean, for one thing, we're standing way too close, and I can feel the heat off your body, and I'm afraid you can hear my heart racing...

Umm... what were we talking about, again?

Oh, right! The love triangle. Hmmm...

"Okay, so," I said after a moment's thought. "Is this really a decision that absolutely has to be made right now?"

"What...?" Petralka blinked, seemingly not expecting my question. "W-Well, it..."

"There's no answer right now, right? I think maybe that's okay."

"Shinichi....."

"There's no answer. Maybe that *is* the answer, for now. Maybe later, when times change, it'll be possible to find another answer."

"But... is that not simply running away from the question?"

"Is that a bad thing?" I smiled awkwardly and scratched my cheek. I guess as someone who had run away into home security guard-ism after being shot down by his oldest friend, I wasn't really one to talk. But then again... "Look," I said, "I was a NEET once."

"A *neat*?"

Oops... I guess she didn't know that word.

"It's, uh, well... Huh. Guess I never really told you about this, did I?" The whole thing with my friend, my failed love story—I'd never actually told Petralka the whole thing. Myusel knew, but... "So, uh... way back when, there was this girl I liked, an old friend of mine. And I told her how I felt about her—this was back in Japan, see? But she just... didn't want anything to do with me."

"D-Didn't she indeed?" Petralka looked almost surprised.

"I let myself get totally down in the dumps over it. I shut myself in my room, stopped wanting to do anything. I spent all my time running away from reality..."

I never went outside. Just stayed in my room, letting time slip away.”

Petralka just looked at me; she didn’t say anything.

“But then the Japanese government, uh, *hired* me as General Manager of Amutech. It’s a pretty crazy story, but that’s how I got here, to Eldant. That’s how I met you, Petralka, and everyone else here. And I couldn’t have asked for more kindness for a bumbling otaku.”

I wasn’t suggesting in any way that it was a good thing to be a NEET or a shut-in. But let’s just say you never know where life’s going to take you. If you find out you can’t push, try pulling. If you assume you can never run away, if you think straight ahead is the only direction you can ever go, then you might find that some opportunities close themselves off. I had a sneaking suspicion that when it comes to living our lives, there wasn’t really such a thing as “the right way,” nothing saying “this is how things have to be.” If you made a choice, and you didn’t regret it, that was enough.

And if that was the case, I didn’t think there was much to gain from rushing a choice you had to make. Maybe you couldn’t put it off forever, but if you had given it all the thought you could, if you had agonized and ruminated and considered and still hadn’t come up with an answer, then maybe that was a sign that right now wasn’t the moment to make that decision.

“If you absolutely can’t choose one way or the other, then put it off for a while,” I said, again with that awkward smile. “Is that such a bad thing?”

Petralka looked at me, blinking furiously. Then, glancing at the ground, she said, “Can it be a good thing?”

“At the very least, I don’t think it’s... bad.”

“Indeed...” Petralka almost whispered, and then she looked up at me again. This time her face was—bright. Cheerful. I didn’t have a lot of life experience to back up my attempt at sage advice, but I guess it had worked for her. “Indeed.” The smile she gave me made my heart feel like it was going to jump out of my chest.

Argh, this girl is cute to death!

But as I stood there with the moe practically rolling off me...

“Your Majesty!” someone called. I flinched. *Er, we’re not doing anything! I swear! Nothing’s going on here!*

Before I could start stuttering excuses, I turned around and saw Prime Minister Zahar, breathing hard as he ran toward us.

“Ah! At last I’ve found you!”

Petralka immediately stood up a little straighter. She nodded at me, the smile on her face telling me that a burden had been lifted off her shoulders. And then she went running—in exactly the opposite direction from Zahar.

“Your... Majesty...!”

Petralka (seventeen years old) was off like a shot, and Zahar (definitely not seventeen) was never going to catch her. At last, the elderly minister came to a halt in front of me, out of energy for the chase. He stood there, bent double, trying to get his breathing under control. It hurt just to watch him cough and shake like that.

Ummmm...

Maybe I shouldn’t have said that stuff about it being okay to run away?

“Are... Are you okay?” I asked.

“Th-Thank you... for your... concern...” Zahar huffed.

To assuage my feelings of guilt, I went over to the prime minister and started gently rubbing his back, trying to help him get the wheezing under control.



Cleaning a house means more than making sure everything is spic and span. When Shinichi-sama, my master, comes home, I want him to be as comfortable as possible in his mansion, so not only does the house have to be clean, all the little details have to be just right. Of course, we have our gardener Brooke-san to take care of the landscaping, but I make sure to sweep the entranceway and periodically weed near the front door.

Today that’s just the sort of thing I was doing, sweeping leaves and dirt out of the foyer, when I suddenly found myself sighing. It made me realize how long I

had been standing there sweeping the same spot.

This wasn't good. I had so much to do: laundry to bring in, dinner to make. I couldn't afford to stand around, uselessly sweeping the same piece of floor over and over. I put the broom away in a hurry, collecting my dustpan and setting it aside. But before long, I found myself letting out another one of those long, unhappy breaths.

Not good? This was downright terrible. All yesterday and today, I had barely been able to concentrate on my work.

"Shinichi-sama..." In spite of myself, I gazed in the direction of the forest—past the interweaving branches, toward the castle that towered over it all. Eldant Castle, where Shinichi-sama was at this very moment. He was, as I understood it, there to try to talk Her Majesty the Empress out of marrying the Prince of Zwelberich. Loek-san and Romilda-san's parents had seemed to think Shinichi-sama was the best person for this job. And certainly, he was very good at expressing himself to Her Majesty. Yet even knowing that, I still felt...

Anxious. Uneasy. Distressed. And all the more so *because* I knew how well Shinichi-sama talked to Her Majesty. What if, as he tried to convince her not to go through with this marriage, he began to focus on her as a woman? And if she began to see him as a man? Then...

"I..."

When I had shared with Shinichi-sama my anxiety that Her Majesty had begun to view him as a possible partner, he had laughed it off and said such a thing wasn't possible. Yet as smart as he was, I believed that this time, he was wrong.

I had been driven to consider my own feelings by talking to Clara-san during her time at our mansion. Until then, I had left them ambiguous, tried not to think too hard about them. I was certainly aware of the immense respect I had for Shinichi-sama, but I hadn't decided whether it was the esteem of a servant for her master, or if it was something I felt for him as a man above and beyond his station. It wasn't a decision I had needed—or, honestly, even wanted—to make.

Maybe the same thing was true of Shinichi-sama when it came to Her Majesty. And what would happen if, in light of these recent events, they came

to acknowledge that they had feelings for each other? The thought made my heart ache. But look at me: a person of my lowly position had no business interfering in the affairs of my master and an empress. All I could do was watch, and see what happened. That almost crushed me, and yet I had no choice at all. Together, those two facts left me empty.

“Shinichi-sama...”

Just speaking the name of this person I had such profound feelings for almost threatened to steal the breath from my lungs. And yet, it seemed I couldn’t stop that name from coming to my lips. Kanou Shinichi-sama. My master, to whom I owed so much. The person who changed my very destiny. The man who accepted me with a smile, with no thought for the blood in my veins.

I sighed again. How many times was this today? I had lost count. And just then...

“Heartsick, my dear?”

I caught my breath and looked in the direction of the voice. A figure was coming toward me. It wore a long, dark cloak that concealed it almost from head to toe. For the life of me, I couldn’t tell who it was. All I could determine was that this person was about my height—and that the voice sounded like it belonged to a young woman.

“May I ask who you are...?” I said, automatically assuming a respectful posture.

Shinichi-sama had come from another world called Ja-pan, to help bring his land and ours together. In other words, he was a most unusual person. It was what had gotten him kidnapped by the neighboring kingdom of Bahairam, caught up with an anti-government gang, and might yet see him targeted again. Could this person be after him, too?

I kept a close eye on the woman as she came to a halt in front of me. “I travel these lands telling fortunes,” she said. “I heard rumors of the master of this house, and came to inquire humbly if he might wish to employ my services.” I could see her looking steadily at me from under her hood.

“You’re a fortune-teller...?”

“I am,” she nodded.

It wasn't unusual for fortune-tellers to visit the homes of nobles or prominent businessmen—houses with money to spare. How often in politics or business does one come up against a decision with no easy answer? When such people simply couldn't decide on their own, they would employ one of these soothsayers. I had even heard it said that some such households kept specialists, a fortune-teller specifically in their employ.

I had been told that my mother, who had an uncommon power called “the Foreseeing Eye,” had used it to help establish her family's business. Although this power was not quite the same thing as fortune-telling. In any event, this woman might have been hoping that, with a little luck, she could become Shinichi-sama's—that is to say, Amutech's—resident fortune-teller. Having such a post with someone who was in the good graces of the empress herself virtually assured a life of ease—or so it would be perfectly natural to think.

“Um, I'm afraid my master isn't in right now...”

“You, Miss.” The woman almost seemed to be shoving aside my words. “There is much on your mind, is there not?”

“What? Er—”

“Might you be... wracked with love, say?”

I felt myself shiver. Yes, that was it: love. This was love... wasn't it? Hearing someone else say it made it feel so much more real, almost impossible to doubt. “How... How did you know...?” I asked.

“My crystals show me everything,” the woman said, producing something from her cloak. It was a necklace hanging around her neck, strung with crystals. It had several overlapping leather straps, and in the middle of it all glittered one crystal substantially larger than the others. “I can see. You are beset by a torturous love, are you not?”

I couldn't form words. I could feel my hair standing on end with shock and fear; it was like she could see right through me.

The woman continued in a voice kind enough to soothe my fears, yet unrelenting in its insight into me. Sounding almost musical, she said, “I will tell

you a thing that happens: a maid may grow smitten with her master.”

I could hardly breathe.

“And this, too, sometimes occurs: a half-elf, though of station most humble, may reach beyond her place and dare to love a human being.”

“Wha—?” Without meaning to, I touched a hand to one ear. Inside the mansion, nobody worried about my being a half-elf. They were too kind. This, too, was thanks to Shinichi-sama. So when I was indoors, I didn’t take pains to hide my ears with my hair. But outside...

“I... I—I...” I felt my face grow hot with embarrassment.

“I am beginning to understand.” A small smile crossed the hooded woman’s face. “And what is more... This master of yours, he fails to recognize how you feel for him, yes?”

“You even know that...?”

Fortune-tellers ran the gamut, from charlatans who simply said whatever came into their heads in hopes that it would strike a chord with their audience, to those like my mother who truly had unusual abilities, who could indeed see things others could not. This woman appeared to be one of the latter.

“That, and more. For all appears in the crystals.” The woman’s face was half hidden in shadow, but she sounded almost eager. “What is your wish? Shall I lend you their aid?”

“W-Would you?! Oh, but...” I had nowhere near enough money to hire an actual seer. Even a single question to someone competent enough to serve nobles and their like would surely not come cheap.

“Worry not. I ask not for payment in coin, only in kind. Perhaps you would see fit to put in a good word for me with your master.”

“Oh, I... I see...”

“Look closely at this crystal. It will show you what you should do.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” I moved closer to the fortune-teller, gazing at the crystal as she said. A few seconds passed. I was perplexed; I didn’t seem to see anything in particular.

“Look veeery closely. Very closely indeed. The crystal is only a catalyst. It is your own will to discover the truth that summons an answer from the void.”

“All right...” I squinted my eyes. And then... *What?* What was that? A feeling, almost as if I myself was being sucked into the crystal. A light seemed to flash within it, and when I squinted even harder to try to get a better look, I felt myself being pulled further into the blackness... “Wha...?”

My head felt fuzzy; I couldn’t quite make myself think. I tried to bring something, anything to mind, but the thoughts slipped away like water through my hands.

“Hoo hoo.....”

As if from far away, I heard the fortune-teller laughing. Yet I felt as if I couldn’t quite be sure... And finally, the darkness overtook me.

Chapter Four: Love's Freedom

The sun was just setting behind Eldant Castle. Minori-san, Hikaru-san, and I arrived back at the mansion via bird-drawn carriage.

"We're home!" we said.

"Welcome back." Myusel was waiting for us in the foyer, as she always was. "Master, Hikaru-sama, Minori-sama. You've had a long day."

"We're doing okay, Myusel. Anything unusual happen while we were away?"

"No, nothing," she said with the tiniest of smiles. Again, just like always. And yet... "Dinner is ready. You can go straight to the dining area." She gestured toward the dining room.

"Well, now," Hikaru-san said. "A little early."

He was right; we usually ate a little later, after we'd had a chance to go to our rooms and collect ourselves. It wasn't like there was a schedule for dinner, but Myusel always had it ready at about the same time. Maybe she'd just been running a little early today?

"Okay, sure, sounds good. I'm definitely hungry."

Maybe she even had a special reason for wanting dinner ready early. Maybe she'd gotten her hands on some interesting new ingredient she was eager to try. There wasn't really anything equivalent to a refrigerator over here, so anything that would normally need refrigeration, you had to use quick. It was possible to preserve ingredients by freezing them with magic, but apparently that kind of magic was pretty tricky, and Myusel didn't know how to do it.

"Sounds like a plan. Thanks, Myusel," I said.

"Not at all." She nodded and smiled, then turned on her heel. I watched her walk calmly down the hallway. She looked exactly like normal, but... What was it? I had a weird feeling I couldn't shake. I couldn't have said why, exactly, but she seemed just a bit off. Something gave me the willies.

“Myusel...?” I had called her name almost before I knew what I was doing.

She stopped and looked at me. “Yes, sir?” She gave a tilt of her head as if to say, *What is it?* Such a sweet, innocent gesture, like a tiny bird; it sure looked like Myusel. So what in the world was this weird vibe I was getting? Hikaru-san and Minori-san were looking at me quizzically; they didn’t seem to think anything was off about Myusel. I shook my head, starting to think that maybe I was the one who had something wrong with him.

“Er... Never mind. Sorry, forget I said anything.”

“Of course,” Myusel said with a smile, and headed toward the kitchen. I watched her walk away.

Minori-san edged up to me and whispered, “Whatsa matter? Huh, Shinichi-kun?”

“Uh, well...” I had to stretch to find the words. “Something just feels... weird. Myusel... It’s like I don’t even know her.”

“Oh, please,” Hikaru-san said, obviously annoyed. “Don’t tell me you’re feeling guilty.”

“Why would you think I’m feeling guilty?”

“Because a person with a prickly conscience starts to think even the most normal expressions and gestures of the people around them look different somehow.”

“I haven’t done anything to feel—”

But before I could finish my sentence, it struck me. The reason Myusel seemed so strange: she was *too* normal.

The last few days, Myusel hadn’t quite been herself. I had gotten the distinct impression that she was worried about what was going on between me and Petralka. She had been doing and saying things to communicate that she cared about me, even if the net result was to make her seem a bit anxious and unsettled.

But now, all that was gone. I felt like some kind of rug had been pulled out from under me.

“Uh, never mind, I’m sure you’re right. It’s all in my head,” I said.

“Ahh, ready to admit that your guilt is eating you alive?”

“I’m not admitting anything!” I howled, but Hikaru-san just smirked.



When we got to the kitchen, our noses filled with the delicious aroma of food. The long table was crowded with dishes. They must have been very fresh, because in addition to the enticing smells, several of the plates were still steaming. Whatever else might be going on with her, Myusel obviously hadn’t lost her knack for cooking.

I’d heard that one of the keys to being a good chef was the ability to run your kitchen efficiently. If you just made one thing, then another, the first dish would be cold by the time the last one was ready. You had to know how to apply a limited number of cooking utensils and a finite amount of time to get the best results.

In any case, when Myusel had said dinner was ready, I hadn’t realized she meant all set out and looking gorgeous, too.

“Gosh, she’s really ahead of schedule,” Minori-san whispered to me as we sat down.

“Myusel?” I asked, perplexed. She was standing against the wall of the dining area. “What’s wrong?”

“What...?”

“Everything’s set, right? Go ahead and sit down.”

Maybe she was waiting for the others—for Elvia, Brooke, and Cerise. Maybe. It was certainly true that I didn’t see our voracious beast girl anywhere, and she was usually the first to come running for dinner. But Myusel, besides making us food, kept the whole huge house clean, washed seven people’s worth of clothes, bedsheets, and so on, and handled all the other little things that had to be done in the mansion. She’d never complained to me, but it wasn’t light work. She must have been tired. I was sure no one in this house would be upset if she went ahead and sat down.

Huh? Wait...

There was so much food set out that at first I hadn't noticed it. But was this just for three people? On closer inspection, I realized only three places had been set with utensils. There was no spot for Elvia, Brooke, or Cerise, let alone Myusel herself. So she wasn't expecting anyone but me, Minori-san, and Hikaru-san to eat? But it got even stranger.

"Yes, sir..." Reluctantly, Myusel sat in an open chair. But there were no place settings, so she had nothing to do there.

"Myusel, are you... feeling all right?"

"Er? Yes, sir, I'm fine."

"Yeah? Good..." I said, but the uneasy feeling I had just kept getting worse.

That was when Elvia came bounding into the dining area, exclaiming, "Man, am I hungry! Can I get a little preview bite of—" But she stopped, surprised, when she saw the dining room table. "Already good to go? Wow, you're killing it tonight!"

Elvia didn't have what you would call the best fuel efficiency in the house, and she often showed up in the dining room or kitchen, pestering Myusel for a little something to eat before dinner. But her reaction proved that Myusel hadn't told her dinner was ready. And it would hardly have mattered anyway, because her place wasn't set with a knife or fork. So... had Myusel not expected Elvia to join us for dinner? Why not?

"Gotta say, I wouldn't mind having dinner at this time every day," Elvia said, flopping down into a chair and looking around eagerly, sniffing the aromas of the food. She always liked to start by smelling what she was going to eat; it reminded you that she really was a werewolf, part beast.

At length, though, she looked around in confusion. "Huh?"

"What's the matter?"

"Well, uh..." Elvia's gaze went from me to Myusel, then to the wealth of food on the table. "There's just this... kind of weird smell..."

"Weird smell?"

“Where from?” Hikaru-san asked.

“Ummm...” Elvia slowly pointed at the food on the table.

Hikaru-san, Minori-san, and I looked at each other. We hadn’t smelled anything unusual. We each focused on the odors around us, but there wasn’t anything I would have called “weird.” I guess you had to be a beast person to pick it up. Or maybe she was just imagining things? But...

“Is somethin’ the matter?” As we all sat there sniffing our food, Brooke and Cerise wandered into the dining area.

“Maybe? Elvia says there’s a weird smell...”

“A smell?” Brooke echoed.

“Brooke!” Cerise shouted, suddenly alert. I had never heard her raise her voice before. She had been about to sit down, but had frozen in place, as if she had realized she’d been about to spring a trap. Brooke, too, stopped—and then he abruptly reached out for the food on the table. He didn’t say anything to us; didn’t make any sound at all, in fact. But these obviously weren’t the actions of someone who was just too hungry to restrain himself. For starters, Brooke didn’t even like the same food we did.

“Impossible...” He brought the food to his nose and inhaled deeply. Then his long tongue emerged from his toothy mouth, and he licked it.

“Brooke?”

“Master, I must ask you to get away from the food—away from this table,” he growled.

“What...?”

“Do it, all of you,” Cerise said, her voice hard.

Our resident lizardman couple rarely showed much emotion. Or maybe more accurately, they were just biologically so different from humans that they showed emotion in entirely different ways. So to me, Brooke and Cerise often looked sort of expressionless. But now, their agitation was obvious. It practically radiated off them—they were serious like I had never seen.

“Wh-What’s going on?”

“This food is poisoned,” Brooke said.

That just about blew my mind. “P-Poisoned?!”

Poisoned, like, *poisoned*? Like, eat it and die? No, wait. There were lots of kinds of poison. Not all of them killed you... at least not right away. But if it had Brooke and Cerise this excited, then it was no small matter.

“Wh-What about you, Brooke?! Are you going to be all right?!”

“It won’t work on me,” he said confidently.

“Because it’s a lizardman concoction,” Cerise added. “An old draught we used to use when we were fighting the humans.”

A *lizardman* poison? Was that similar to what a venomous snake produced? Or was it, like, a secret recipe for a poison passed down among the lizardmen? Either way, it worked against humans—and was potent enough to have been used in war. The chances that this was the kind of poison that killed you immediately were starting to look pretty good.

“But it works very well on humans, and anyone built like a human—elves and werewolves, say,” Brooke went on. “One lick of that food could be perilous. Don’t touch it.”

“We have to assume the poison is on all the food,” Cerise said.

I nearly choked. I could hardly believe it—didn’t want to believe it—but why would Brooke and Cerise lie about something like this? Poison on all the food, though—you couldn’t taint *all* the food by sprinkling some poison around when no one was looking. Or even by slipping one bad ingredient into a bunch. Which meant...

“This poison... Myusel...?” The astonished whisper came from Elvia.

All of us looked at Myusel. She had been sitting silently on looking at the food, but as our collective gaze fell on her, she stood up and shook her head emphatically. “N-No! I s-swear it wasn’t me!”

“It... It wasn’t...?” Of course it wasn’t. Myusel would never do something like this. It was unimaginable, impossible. But then... who?

“Master!” As I stood there dithering, Myusel threw herself at me, burying her

face in my chest.

“M-Myusel?!”

“Please believe me! I would never...”

“Whoa, hey, I—?!”

Er, uh, Myusel? With you being so... so close to me and all, my galaxy is in danger of this and that and/or/but it's a veritable ecstasy, right? And I don't know if this very tense, very difficult time is the right moment for that...

“Master...!” Myusel looked at me beseechingly. Her lavender eyes swam with tears, her pale cheeks were flushed, and she looked truly desperate. I couldn't deny that there was a certain sexiness to—*geez, I really am a lost cause, aren't I?!*

“Please, please believe me, I beg you! I would never try to poison the master I love...!” I could feel her hand creeping around toward my back... My back?

I took Myusel by the shoulders and shoved her away.

“Mas—”

“Who... are you?”

“Wha...?” Myusel's brimming eyes got even wider. Like she couldn't believe I was asking that. Couldn't believe I would ever ask such a thing. Her face was frozen in a mixture of horror and despair, as if she had been betrayed by the one person she thought she could trust.

No. Something was wrong. This wasn't Myusel. Whoever was talking to me now, it wasn't the Myusel I knew.

“I—I'm Myusel Fourant...”

“No, you aren't,” I said.

Myusel had never been so calculating. She wasn't capable of it. Desperate as she might be to convince me of her innocence, she would never suddenly throw herself on me, wrap her arms around me. And she would *absolutely* never refer to me as “the master I love.” Not even when she might have gotten away with it, and certainly not here. If she'd been able to say such a thing, then she

wouldn't have had to stand around awkwardly with me the other day. But as it was, hyper-conscious of her birth and her station in life, she couldn't even bring herself to say that she liked me.

"I knew something was wrong here," I went on. "The moment we sat down, I wondered why there was only human food on the table."

"What...?" Myusel—or whoever it was pretending to be Myusel—froze with surprise.

"Werewolves and lizardmen, they don't like quite the same things as humans. So Myusel always makes something special just for each of them. But today, all the food on the table was for humans to eat. You didn't even set places for Elvia, Brooke, or Cerise."

It only made sense. Of course this imposter wouldn't know that in our household, everyone ate together: masters and servants, regardless of who or what you were. That was why "Myusel" hadn't sat down with us, but had stayed waiting by the wall. It was what she *would* do if this household was like every other mansion in Eldant. But it wasn't.

"Master..." She gazed at me, and she really did look just like Myusel. If she were to stand still, without saying anything, I would never have been able to tell her from the real thing. Or... what if she was the real thing, but under someone else's control?

"Shinichi-kun!" Suddenly, Minori-san grabbed me from behind by the collar.

"Hrgh?!" I choked a little—as a flash of silver light whipped in front of my eyes.

I almost choked again, this time because I realized the flash was a knife that Myusel had swung at me. I sat where I had fallen on my behind on the floor, numb, hardly able to believe what I was seeing.

"Pfah." Myusel gave a disappointed cluck as the knife swept through empty air where my neck had been an instant before.

A "disappointed cluck"? Myusel? What? What was going on here? Where had she even been hiding that knife? Okay, forget that. More importantly, *most* importantly: Myusel was trying to kill me? But this Myusel wasn't Myusel, so—

arrgh, none of this made any sense!

“Get up!” Minori-san tugged again, this time on my arm, dragging me to my feet. She moved in front of me protectively. Hikaru-san stood flanked by Brooke and Cerise, who looked ready to fight. Even Hikaru-san looked a little queasy about this turn of events.

“Myusel!” Something moved on the edge of my vision. It was Elvia. She was flying toward Myusel. “Take this!” Myusel stabbed at Elvia with the knife, but the beast girl ducked low in a dodge, then smacked Myusel’s right hand from below, sending the knife spinning through space until it buried itself in the ceiling. “The hell’s wrong with you?!” Despite her confusion, Elvia grabbed Myusel’s wrists to restrain her.

Myusel, though, ignored her immobilized hands—she brought up her right leg and launched a kick at Elvia. The attack showed an agility—and a ruthlessness—that could never have come from the real Myusel. Her skirt billowed up, blinding Elvia. It allowed the kick to connect with the werewolf’s solar plexus.

“Gah!” With a sharp exhalation, Elvia let go of Myusel’s hands and stumbled backwards. Without missing a beat, Myusel pointed her palms at Elvia and exclaimed, “Tifu murottsu!”

She must have had the spell ready to go from the moment Elvia caught her wrists. A massive gust slammed into Elvia, so fast and so powerful that even her beast person reflexes couldn’t help her. She was slammed against the wall, hard.

“Hrgh...”

“Elvia!” I exclaimed. I was about to rush over to her, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw Myusel’s hands again, this time pointed at me.

“Tifu murottsu!”

It might have been low-level magic, but if it was good enough for the military to teach as an attack, then it was nothing to sneeze at. I was already a little off balance, and like Elvia, the blast of wind sent me flying. I (along with a nearby chair) hit the wall, and I collapsed to the ground, the air knocked out of my lungs.

“Ergh... gah...” My back hurt. My chest hurt. It was hard to breathe, and my head was spinning. I tried to run through a checklist of body parts to make sure I still had everything, but I could hardly think clearly enough to do it. I looked at the room through a haze of red. Minori-san had been thrown into a corner. She must have taken the brunt of the magical attack trying to cover me. The caster of Tifu Murotsu has some control over exactly how powerful it is, but Myusel obviously wasn’t holding back. Otherwise it wouldn’t have gotten both of us.

“Myusel!” Brooke cried, still standing guard over Hikaru-san. He made to tackle her like Elvia had done, but stopped when Myusel took a couple of long, quick strides over to me and put a foot on my neck. The message was obvious: *Move, and I break his neck.*

Myusel’s foot was crushing my throat now. Her eyes as she looked down at me were terrifyingly cold.

Ahh, my Queen, thank you for this reward..... Er, nope! Not the time!

This was bad. This was very, very bad.

“Myusel...” I gasped between labored breaths. “I can... see your panties, y-you know...”

Not the time for that either! What am I even saying?!

And Myusel didn’t even react! They were, like, right out there!

Almost emotionless, Myusel reached towards the table, picking up a knife from a place setting. It was just an eating utensil, nowhere near as sharp as the one that was currently residing in the ceiling of the dining area—but with enough force and in the right place, it would be more than enough to kill a person.



As if to make sure it would work, Myusel first stabbed the knife into some of the nearby food. If that poison could kill you by licking it, it could sure kill you if it got in an open wound. Now I was really frightened. She truly meant to kill me, and she knew what she was doing.

“Myus—”

My maid looked down at me, expressionless, the way you would look at a rock on the side of the road. I could feel tears running from my eyes. I didn’t want to see Myusel this way. The Myusel I knew might quail sometimes, might not have a lot of self-confidence, but she was always dedicated to whatever she was doing, she was always supremely kind, and more than anything else, she had the cutest smile in the world. She didn’t have it in her to stare that empty, cruel stare at anyone.

I didn’t want to die. I really didn’t. But even more than that, I grieved at the thought that the last thing I would see would be Myusel staring at me with those unfeeling eyes.

“Myusel...” I gasped her name, my voice scratching. I thought maybe, just maybe, I saw her shoulder twitch. Or maybe I was imagining it. And then...



Everything was hazy, like I was trapped in a dream. I could see and I could hear, but it was a tremendous effort to try to think or do anything about what I saw or heard.

What *was* I doing?

Even asking that question took an agonizing amount of time. Everything I saw was fuzzy and out of focus; everything I heard was a meaningless babble of sound, so that I hardly knew what was going on. All I heard was...

“Myusel...”

That one word. *Myusel*. My name. And calling it was... who?

Ever so slowly, I felt things come into better focus. Gradually, the haze parted, as if I were drifting up from the bottom of a lake.

I blinked.

Shinichi-sama. My honored master. The one... the one I served. The one who was more important to me than anyone else.

But... why? Why was Shinichi-sama fallen at my feet? In fact, it felt like his neck was under my foot. As if I were stepping on him...



For that matter, what was I doing with this... knife? I was holding it in an icepick grip, but why? We did seem to be in the middle of dinner, but this was the wrong way to hold a knife for eating. It was as if I were about to bring it down and stab something... or...

Stab. With a knife.

But what? Who?

Shinichi-sama.....?

Kill him, I heard someone say in my mind. Kill him, Myusel Fourant. Kill him now, and he will be yours forever.

Shinichi-sama... would be... mine... for... ever.

Mine. Forever.

That... That sounded very good to me.

Do it! Finish him, quickly!

But, that was a bad thing. Kill Shinichi-sama? That was not good. I couldn't do it. I absolutely..... absolutely couldn't.

Kiiiiiiii hiiiiim.....!

No. I couldn't.

The hand holding the knife began to tremble, as if revealing the turmoil within me. Kill Shinichi-sama? I could never...

Fine, said the voice in my head. In that case: raise your right hand.

Yes. Yes, of course.

And then bring it down as hard as you can.

Yes, I understood.

I raised the hand with the knife, as I had been instructed. Then I would bring it down. It was simple. I would bring it down on— *On Shinichi-sama*. I caught my breath.

“No...!” I used my left hand to grab my right, which felt as if it didn't belong to me anymore. It was pressing down so hard, though, that I couldn't restrain it;

the knife reached Shinichi-sama... “St-Stop this!”

Bam! A sound like a thunderclap rang in my ears. At the same time, I felt a sharp pain shoot through my hand. I stumbled and collapsed beside Shinichi-sama, and the knife I’d thought I had such a firm grip on went tumbling through the air and landed on the ground.

The pain seemed to drive something out of me; the haze that had been clinging to my brain suddenly dispersed.

I grasped that I had been shot with a gun. More accurately, it wasn’t me, but the knife, that had been shot. I felt a mingled numbness and pain from my hand, but no trickle of blood. Minori-sama, she must have...

I caught my breath: everything suddenly snapped back into focus. The kaleidoscope of meaningless pieces slammed into coherence. I realized what I had been about to— “Shinichi-sama?!” I turned to Shinichi-sama, who was lying beside me. I moaned when I saw the little scratches on his face, his cheeks. “No—Shinichi-sama?!?”

Had I—had my hand, with the poisoned knife...?

“Myusel...?” Shinichi-sama said my name. “You’re... You’re back... Good...”

“Shinichi-samaaaa!”

He was going to die! There had to be something I could do. There had to.

The poison—maybe I could remove the poison.

I leaned against Shinichi-sama and put my lips to the wounds on his cheek. I began to suck out the blood. I could taste the sharp tang of it as it entered my mouth; I spat it out, then took another mouthful and spat that out, too.

“Myus...”

I didn’t answer. When I had been in the military, they had taught me the very basics of how to deal with poison. Whether a poison would be lethal or not was a question of quantity. There was a lethal dose of every poison, a minimum amount that had to be present in order to do its deadly work. Less than that, and not only would it not be effective: properly diluted, some poisons could even have medicinal applications, they had taught me. If I could suck out

enough of the poisoned blood, I might be able to bring it down below the lethal threshold. That was all I could hope for now.



And so I...

“Myusel.”

Somebody was calling my name from behind me, taking my shoulders, as I kept sucking at the wound, spitting out the blood, again and again.

“Myusel, you’ve done your part. Move aside, please.” It was Cerise-san, who pulled me away from Shinichi-sama. “This will do more good.” She handed me a bowl. There was a red liquid in it, almost like blood... “It’s my blood. It should help neutralize the poison.”

“The poison doesn’t work on us because our blood naturally neutralizes all poisons. And being that toxin came from the lizardmen to begin with...”

I had no time to listen to Brooke-san’s explanation. I took the bowl from Cerise-san, sipped the blood, and then...

Then I put my lips to Shinichi-sama’s and let it out into his mouth.

Work. Please, work. Shinichi-sama, don’t die. I’m begging you, don’t leave us.

That was the only thought in my mind as I held tight to Shinichi-sama. Perhaps it was the effects of the poison that caused him to begin spasming gently.



When I came to, I found myself on one of the living room sofas. I guess only enough of the poison had gotten into my blood to put me to sleep instead of killing me. I didn’t know much about poisons in this world, let alone poisons that came from lizardmen, but Myusel had sucked out much of it and Cerise had given me her blood with its toxin-neutralizing qualities—and this stuff still knocked me clean out for a while. It had been serious, fast-acting stuff. I trembled to think what would have happened if I had actually eaten any of that food. Talk about your narrow escapes.

I looked around as things came back into focus, and there was my maid beside the sofa, in a posture of abject apology.

“Um... Myusel?” I said. “What... What are you doing?”

“M-Master, I... I...” Myusel wouldn’t even look up; she kept her face pressed

to the floor. She seemed to feel she didn't have the right to look at me. I knew she was trying to apologize, but I was starting to feel guilty myself just looking at her. "...I've done... the most terrible thing..."

Presumably she meant the whole trying-to-poison-us thing.

"What the heck happened?" I asked. It did appear to be Myusel herself, and not some imposter, who had poisoned the food and then tried to stab me. I also remembered, however hazily, Myusel trying to get the poison out of the wound on my cheek and then helping me drink Cerise's blood. So it didn't seem like she had just snapped and decided to murder me.

...Er, wait.

Ahem. Uh.

I also seemed to remember she had gotten Cerise's blood into my mouth by putting it into *her* mouth and then...

So, uh, ahem, well, was this... was it sort of... my first k-k-k—
Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!

Was it?! And with Myusel?! Had we really—?!

I mean, I wasn't unhappy that it was with Myusel—in fact, that was great, but—arrgh, dammit, thanks to that poison, I could hardly even remember what it had felt like! That was no fair! And it didn't even taste like lemon, it tasted like blood! Yes, poison-neutralizing blood for which I was very grateful to Cerise, but still! I wanted a do-over!

As I was busy mentally crying out to some god somewhere: "Myusel..."
Minori-san crouched down next to Myusel, who was still trembling so hard you could hear her teeth chattering. "It's okay. We know you would never try to kill Shinichi-kun."

That finally got Myusel to at least raise her head. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying.

"We know it wasn't you, so tell us," Minori-san said. "What happened?"

"What happened..." Myusel blinked her moist eyes and tried to think. Finally she said, "J-Just outside the mansion, I met a fortune-teller... She said she

would tell my future using her crystals. She said to look into the crystals, and then...”

“Some kind of hypnosis, maybe. Or mind-control magic?” Hikaru-san said. He was standing behind Minori-san, his arms crossed. “If there is such a thing.”

Yeah... Magic. Magic that would let you control someone’s mind or spirit. That would explain why Myusel, the real one, had suddenly tried to murder me. She was doing it against her will; someone who wanted to get at me had made Myusel her tool.

“That’s a good question. I’ve seen Tifu Murotsu, of course, and I’ve seen people start fires with magic, but I’ve never seen any kind of mind-control spells. Does that sort of thing even exist? Come to think of it, don’t the magic rings prove that there is magic that can interact with a person’s brain?”

“Magic for the domination of someone’s heart or mind is not much known in Eldant...” The comment came from Brooke. “But I have heard that a tradition of such magic exists in the Kingdom of Zwelberich. It’s said they use it to control their demi-human slaves.”

“Control their... demi-human...”

We already knew that discrimination against demi-humans was rampant in Zwelberich. But discrimination like that always ran the risk of making the subjugated people so angry that they finally rebelled. I guess Zwelberich used mind-control magic to keep that from happening. For those slaves, it must have been like being chained and bound without any physical restraints at all.

“So Zwelberich...”

“Hold on,” Minori-san said. “We don’t know that they’re behind this. This was an extremely sophisticated assassination attempt. We can’t jump to conclusions just based on what we think. All the more so if it involves politics from this world. One wrong move, and this could turn into an international incident between Eldant and Zwelberich.” Minori-san took Myusel by the arm and hauled her to her feet. “First things first. Let’s go to the castle. If someone is really out to get you, Shinichi-kun—if they commit a large number of troops, or set the mansion on fire, or who knows what—then I won’t be able to protect you alone. The castle is a well-defended, public place where I have to assume

they won't want to try anything if they don't have to."

"Good idea. I'll... I'll go get ready." Still finding it slightly difficult to breathe, I forced myself up off the sofa.



So that was the story. Brooke ran to call us a bird-drawn carriage, into which we duly climbed and headed for the castle. "We" included me and Hikaru-san, as well as Minori-san and Elvia for bodyguards. Myusel was there, too; we would need her to explain what had happened. Not to mention that now that the assassination had failed, there was a chance Myusel herself would be targeted, to keep her from telling anyone what she knew.

"I hope Brooke and Cerise will be okay," I said quietly. I felt the carriage rocking softly under my feet. Partly because you could only fit so many people in a carriage, and partly out of concern that the culprit might come back to the mansion, we had left Brooke and Cerise to guard the house.

"They'll be fine," said Minori-san, who sat beside me with her gun at the ready. She probably figured you never know when the next attack might come. At her feet sat a suitcase with a 9mm machine pistol, smoke bombs, and a variety of other toys. The suitcase itself was bulletproof and could be used as a shield. She looked like she was ready to go to war.

As for me, I sat between Minori-san and Myusel, with Hikaru-san and Elvia sitting on the bench across from us.

"Considering our would-be assassin used a poison that doesn't work on lizardmen, I don't think she was ever after Brooke or Cerise. She didn't even know that masters and servants eat together in our house—I don't think she could have imagined it."

"So you think she was from the Kingdom of Zewelberich?"

"Even in Eldant, it's not exactly normal for everyone to eat together like that, is it?"

"No, it isn't," Myusel confirmed, shaking her head.

"You see? That alone doesn't prove anything. Even the mind-control magic—

technology crosses borders easily enough. And we still don't have any actual evidence."

"I... I guess you're right."

Maybe it seems obvious to say, but mind-control magic didn't leave any physical traces, so we had nothing to submit as evidence. Myusel had said she had been under someone else's control, but we had to take her at her word, along with the tremendous deviation from her normal behavior. If someone countered that Myusel had decided to kill me of her own volition for some unknown reason, though, we would have no objective way to refute the claim.

"I assume the culprit had a story in mind," Minori-san said. "She probably planned to make it look like the demi-human servant finally got sick of her master's abuse and decided to kill the humans. Lucky for us, we had Elvia to sniff out that poison."

Myusel didn't say anything, but I saw her shudder. She had been the one who made the poisoned food, so maybe she felt like that was a jab at her.

"Myusel... It's okay. It's not your fault," I said. I hesitated for a moment and then—summoning up extra courage because I was a nasty otaku whose number of years without a girlfriend was exactly equal to his number of years alive—I took her hand.

"Shinichi-sama..." Myusel looked at me, her eyes damp. Her smile never failed to bring me joy, but this misty-eyed expression—how could I not get moe about this? It was so sweet, and I felt my heart start pounding.

But, uh, never mind that...

"You suppose this person didn't know about Elvia?" Hikaru-san said, looking curious.

I could see where he was coming from—if our attacker had known there was a werewolf in the house, they wouldn't have used a poison that could be detected by its odor. It seemed like Elvia didn't even have an especially exceptional sense of smell by werewolf standards.

"Who, me?" Elvia looked almost as perplexed as Hikaru-san.

“Or maybe they misjudged just how good a werewolf’s nose is,” Minori-san said. If the culprit was someone with a low view of demi-humans, it might make sense for them to underestimate demi-human abilities. “Or maybe it’s because Elvia isn’t officially a servant in our household.”

“Ah, I see,” Hikaru-san said.

Myusel, Brooke, and Cerise-san were all, on paper, employees of the Eldant state, posted to our house as servants. If the assassin had been looking at employment records while planning her strike...

“Eldant couldn’t exactly just hire on a former Bahairamanian agent,” Hikaru-san said. “So she wouldn’t be in the paperwork.”

We had managed to win Elvia over to our side, but in principle, she was still an active spy for Bahairam. Call her a double agent of a sort. That had benefits for Eldant, too—or anyway, that was how I’d explained it to Petralka and Garius to get them to go along with it. The effect was that Elvia lived in our mansion, but she didn’t exist in the official records, any more than a stray dog or cat we’d taken in.

“Well, I’m sure glad she *was* there,” I said.

“Aw, you’re makin’ me blush,” she said, giggling a little and scratching the back of her head shyly.

“The point is, the attempt to poison us failed,” Minori-san said. Her voice was flat, almost like she was reciting from memory. “So the killer went after Shinichi-kun, hoping to at least take him out. If she could do that and then shut Myusel up somehow, she still might be able to make it look like a demi-human maid who’d tried to kill the master she resented. The maid tries to poison the man and fails, and knowing that there’s no escape, she takes herself with him and everything is over... I’m sure that was Plan B.”

“What was important to this criminal was to make it look like an inside job,” Hikaru-san said. “She could have picked Brooke or Cerise to do it, but she chose Myusel... Maybe she was angling for a love affair gone wrong?”

“L-Love affair...?” That was awfully blunt!

“Goes something like this: Myusel and Shinichi-san are an item, but the

difference in social status between them means nothing can come of it. They can never publicly proclaim their love, never get married. So one or both of them settles on a suicide pact.”

“But why would I—why would she—? Who even benefits from that crazy story?” I said. Personally, I thought the abused-servant-gone-berserk thing was more than sensible enough.

“Why don’t we ask Her Majesty?” Hikaru-san said.

“What...?” Petralka? Why would we ask her? Did this have to do with the whole thing about Petralka seeing me as a man? I mean, not that I thought she did, but *if* she did, hypothetically...

Okay, say Petralka was in love with Kanou Shinichi. And say Shinichi and his servant were, uh, well, you know... And then say that Myusel, in a fit of desperation, kills them both. What then? *What then...?*

“Her Majesty becomes that much more receptive to a marriage with Prince Rubert,” Hikaru-san concluded.

I caught my breath. So Zwelberich really was behind this? But even all this was just speculation—we didn’t have any proof. The important thing now was to get to the castle and tell Petralka and the others about this. Whether or not Zwelberich was involved, a VIP of the Eldant Empire had been the subject of an attempted assassination, and that was almost certainly something the government needed to know.

As I was thinking all this, though...

“Um...” Elvia cocked her head as if she had just realized something.

“What is it, Elvia?”

“Is... Is this the right way?”

“Huh?”

“I don’t go to the castle all that much. Maybe I’m just getting mixed up—but aren’t we supposed to come out of the woods eventually?”

That got me to look out the window. She was right: I would have been expecting to see the city come into view about now, but all I saw was trees

shrouded by the darkness of evening. I edged up out of my seat to get a better look— “Yikes!”

The carriage rocked violently. Everyone else was fine—they were still in their seats—but it threw me back, on top of Myusel.

“Woopf!” I felt myself caught by something soft.

Soft? That had to be...

“Eep! S-Sorry...” I managed, scrambling away from her.

“N-No, it’s all right...” Myusel said, looking studiously at the ground.

I could still feel the brush of her chest against my cheek. She wasn’t, y’know, *huge*, but you weren’t going to miss that there were two gentle hills there, and I’d had my face pressed right up against them.

Ohhh... Ahhh...

As I trembled with emotion, Hikaru-san regarded me with a mixture of awe and fear. “Shinichi-san... Going for the lucky-perv thing even at a time like this... Truly, you are a force to be reckoned with...!”

“I wasn’t *going* for anything,” I protested. “It was an accident! I’m innocent!”

And I *was* innocent, but that was starting to seem less and less important, because the carriage wouldn’t stop shaking. In fact, it was getting worse. We each looked around for something to grab hold of so we wouldn’t be thrown out of our seats.

“Wh-What the heck’s goin’ on?!” Elvia cried. Thanks to her tail, she could keep her footing even with the carriage pitching and rocking, and now she went over to the window that looked out of the passenger compartment at the driver’s bench.

I heard her gasp. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

“There’s no driver!”

“Huh?!”

How could that be?! Elvia helped hold me up as I stretched to peer through the window. And she was right: the driver’s bench was empty. Plus, the huge

birds that normally pulled our carriage sedately along had obviously gone berserk. Hence all the shaking. And on top of *that*, the reins had been cut so we couldn't easily get the birds back under control. Someone had been very thorough.

This was bad. It looked like things were genuinely out of control. Then...

"Shinichi-sama! This is real bad!"

"I think things are already pretty bad! You mean there's something worse?"

"We're headed for a cliff!"

"Hrk...?!"

Werewolves have excellent night vision, so Elvia was able to see where we were going better than the rest of us.

Minori-san acted quickly. "No choice—!" She swept the inside of the carriage with a glance, then gave the doors a kick. I didn't know whether it had more to do with strength or technique, but they flew open with a crash. It almost looked like they had been ripped clean off, and outside, I could see the nighttime forest whipping by at an incredible pace.

"We have to jump!"

"Jump?! You mean from in here to—to out there?!" The incredulous question came from Hikaru-san.

His reaction was only natural. Our carriage was moving at a serious clip. It's not like we had a speedometer, but I would have guessed we were doing around 50 kilometers an hour—almost as fast as a car. We weren't exactly going to be landing on asphalt, but breaking bones if we came down wrong was still a definite possibility. And, considering the likelihood that those bones could be our spines or our skulls, a very worrying one.

Then again, this seemed like a better option than simply plunging off a cliff.

"Myusel, can you slow us down using magic? Even just for a second?" Minori-san said.

"Y-Yes, ma'am!" Myusel quickly began chanting an incantation. When I heard it, I immediately guessed what she was planning to do. It was that familiar spell,

Tifu Murottso. That wasn't a surprise; Myusel didn't know that many different spells. But she wasn't going to use it the normal way this time. The source and the direction of the magic were different.

"Tifu murottso!" we chorused.

As soon as I figured out Myusel's plan, I hurried to recite the spell. We fired our magic directly forward, pitting the momentum of our spells against the rampaging carriage.

Bam! The carriage trembled with the shock, but it also slowed down visibly. We had each dropped Tifu Murottso about a meter in front of us, something that would normally have been suicidal. But in this case, the two wind blasts had the effect of killing the carriage's speed.

"Now!" Minori-san shouted.

"A-Are you sure about this?" Hikaru-san said, still obviously hesitant. And who could blame him? Even slowed down, the carriage was still going at a pretty good rate. Not to mention, Hikaru-san was wearing one of his fluffy, frilly Goth-loli dresses, which probably wouldn't make it any easier to land.

Unfortunately for him, we didn't have time to dither. That cliff was still coming at us alarmingly fast.

"Elvia!" I shouted. I had been in a very similar situation once, back in Japan. It had taught me, among other things, that werewolves had the agility to leap from one moving car to another. And Elvia, who had been the werewolf in question, immediately understood what I was asking her to do. She grabbed Hikaru-san in her arms.

"Don't mind me, Hikaru-sama!"

"Huh? Eeyipes!"

Hikaru-san's shout trailed away as Elvia jumped out of the carriage, Goth-loli boy and all. She landed—but not on the ground. The incredible strength of her legs allowed her to leap several meters. She planted both feet against the trunk of the tree beside the road, absorbing most of the impact before dropping delicately to the ground.

Yep. That's what I'd been hoping for. Myusel, Minori-san, and I followed her out of the carriage. We didn't have a beast girl to carry us, and we certainly didn't have Elvia's physical prowess, but we each rolled as best we could, and combined with the reduced speed of the carriage, we managed to make it out without breaking any bones. Although I managed to hit my back on a rock in the ground at the very last minute, so that hurt a bit.

"Gnnrrr..."

"Shinichi-sama, are you all right?!" Myusel jumped to her feet and came running over to me.

"F-Fine, thanks." I took her hand and let her help me up. Minori-san was already on her feet, her gun drawn, looking this way and that. Not far away, Hikaru-san was upright but leaning on Elvia for support. I guess our little stunt had taken the wind out of his sails.

"What about the carriage?!" I said.

We all looked in the direction of our runaway ride—just in time to see it disappear from view. It went right over the cliff.

I ran over to look down after it. It was about seven or eight meters to the bottom. Below, I could see the smashed carriage—and the birds who had been pulling it. To my surprise, the two of them were flapping around energetically. They might not have been able to fly, but I guess they were still birds—lighter than they looked. And good for them. Oxen or horses would certainly have broken a lot of bones in that fall. Maybe somebody slipped the birds some drugs or something to work them up; in any event, I didn't see myself wanting to get close to them as they thrashed and kicked.

One thing was clear: if we had stayed on that carriage, that would have been it for us.

"Why did they go crazy...?" Myusel said fearfully, coming up beside us and looking over the edge of the cliff. "And what happened to our driver?"

Minori-san came over to us. "Whoever did this was either posing as our driver to begin with, or took their place somewhere along the way. They must have either poisoned the birds or put a spell on them, then jumped off the carriage

and hid somewhere.”

“So it was supposed to look like an accident?” I mused.

“Most likely.”

Wait a second...

“Accidental” deaths were a pretty effective assassination method in that they didn’t leave a lot of evidence, but they lacked the certainty of poisoning or stabbing your target. I mean, look at us: we’d managed to escape. The birds pulling the carriage weren’t even dead. Meaning...

“You think the culprit is around here, waiting to make sure they got us?”

“Shinichi-sama!” Elvia, still holding onto Hikaru-san, shouted. “There was somebody over there, just now!”

Myusel made to run in the direction Elvia indicated, but Minori-san grabbed her hand. “Myusel, you stay here.”

“B-But...” Her face was bright red. I had hardly ever seen this before—but it looked like she was furious. “That fortune-teller—that woman—sh-she made me... I nearly...”

“I know how you must feel, but we’re dealing with a professional here,” Minori-san said quickly. “And you’ve seen her face, so she’ll be especially eager to rub you out. Let me handle this!” Then she made sure she had a firm grip on her pistol and started running.

“Minori-sama—!”

“Myusel, Elvia, you stay with the boys, keep them safe!” Minori-san said, and then she disappeared into the darkness among the trees.



A figure flitted through the woods. Its speed was impressive, given how dark it was and how many obstacles there were in the way. Whoever we were dealing with, maybe they had assumed from the start that the poison might not finish the job. Maybe they had planned this “accident” all along. Maybe they had studied the topography here, knew already where the trees grew and how

best to get away from the scene of the crime as quickly as possible. Or maybe they were even using magic to allow them to see in the dark.

Whatever their methods, I was in danger of losing them. I didn't have any night-vision equipment.

"Stop right there! *Poosuto!*" I shouted as I dashed after the fleeing figure. I was sure they could hear me, but, thinking they might be outside the effective range of the magic ring, I added the command in Eldant as well. Although we called it that for convenience's sake, the language shared its basic grammar and primary vocabulary with the languages of several of the surrounding countries, so it served as a sort of common tongue. Even if the person I was pursuing wasn't from Eldant, there was a good chance they would understand what I was saying. Then again, there were only so many things I was likely to be shouting in this situation.

It was all a moot point, though, because the person showed no sign of slowing down.

"Fi uoi tonodo poosuto ia katta uoi!" Stop or I'll shoot!

Now I'd given fair warning. I leveled my gun at the fleeing figure. Still they didn't slow down. Not that I'd really expected them to. There was a good chance they didn't even know what a gun was. Of course they wouldn't stop because I warned them I would use one. And if they were really a professional assassin, they might not have stopped anyway.

Okay, fine. Never make a threat you aren't willing to carry out. I pulled the trigger on my 9-millimeter.



It was the middle of the night, in the woods, with me trying to hit a moving target with a pistol. I knew single shots weren't likely to land, so I switched to three-round burst fire.

The pistol's earsplitting report shook the chilly night. By the light of the muzzle flash, I saw the figure flop to the ground. Perfect. I'd aimed at the legs and feet, to avoid killing them.

I moved in on my opponent, gun still at the ready. Suddenly, the figure tossed mightily across the ground. Were they trying to *roll* away from me? Or— I got a bad feeling. I pulled up my gun, which emitted a metallic screech.

It was complete luck that I was able to block it. And by "it," I mean the small, black bladed weapon, a sort of throwing star, that was now buried in the trunk of a nearby tree. The killer must have expected they might need to use it at night. It wouldn't be very deadly... unless perhaps it was covered in that lizardman poison.

Anyway, the point was made: if I didn't approach carefully, I was likely to buy the farm. I kept working my way closer, but slowed down.

The assassin took that opportunity to drag themselves to their feet and start running again—or rather, shuffling quickly. Clearly, they hadn't given up hope of escape.

I could smell blood in the air. At least one of my shots had definitely landed. Unfortunately for me, they had landed on someone who didn't give up very easily. This enemy was earning my grudging respect—they were obviously tough stuff—but I almost had them now, and I wouldn't give up, either.

Could I have just shot them in the back? Sure, but I didn't want to take the risk of killing them. We needed this assassin alive so that we could find out exactly who was behind all this. Lone wolves could be killed off and not be any more trouble, but if some organization or even some country were responsible, then they would simply send someone to replace whoever we took out.

I worked my way along. Now that my opponent could no longer run, I didn't have to worry about losing sight of them. I holstered my weapon, pulling on a blade-proof glove instead. This was a personal item; not standard issue. It used

carbon plates and woven aramid fibers, like a bulletproof vest. I could hold a weapon by the blade, be it a cleaver or combat knife, and be completely safe. The glove was awfully thick, though, so it wasn't easy to use a gun while wearing it.

I took one more look to make sure of my opponent's exact location—and then I jumped on them from behind.

Maybe they had been expecting me to come in for some hand-to-hand fighting, because they bent forward, dodging me, then pulled something from under their cloak and thrust it out at me. A dagger, painted black so it would blend with the night.

I dodged. Honestly, a stab with a knife from unsteady footing wasn't likely to do a lot of harm. Sometimes such a stab could be deflected by clothing or even skin; it rarely reached the vital organs. But again, if the blade was poisoned, then even a scratch could be deadly.

My opponent stabbed again, and then again. But their movements were simple—I could see all kinds of wasted motion, and more than anything, they didn't commit to the strikes. Instead they came at me with a series of short jabs, maybe worried that I would grab their arm if they tried anything more serious. Of course, if they knew all they needed to do to win was to scratch their opponent, then this would be a sensible strategy.

It was starting to look like my foe was a specialist in assassination, but not necessarily in the fighting arts. Calmly, I took a step closer. Nice and deliberate. My opponent was still jabbing at me with the knife, but I passed it using my gloved right hand—and in the same motion, I drove my now raised right elbow into my opponent's chest.

"Hrgh!" There was a short, sharp exhalation of breath. My opponent leaned over, and I took advantage of the movement to grab their arm. I turned in a half-spin, using my back and hips to lift them into the air, then pulling on their arm to bring them around and slam them into the ground. A classic shoulder throw.

"Gagh!" My opponent hit the earth, gave a shout, and stopped moving.

There are a couple reasons police forces and similar organizations in Japan

teach their people judo instead of karate or kenpo. One is that judo throws are safer for dealing with knives than systems where you attack head-on, but most of all it's because judo throws double as control techniques. Most people can survive being thrown once or twice, but when you hit the ground, the air goes out of your lungs and even the toughest opponent will be briefly rendered immobile.

That didn't mean I was going to take my eyes off my enemy, of course. I stayed in a fighting posture and watched the other person closely, but they didn't move. Out cold, I suspected. It could be an act, a ploy to get me to lower my guard, though, so I watched very carefully as I shuffled closer, bent down, and then reached out to take off the attacker's hood. I pulled it off in one swift motion.

"She's a woman..."

Not only that, she was a woman I recognized. I didn't know her name, but I remembered her single, long ponytail. She was Prince Rubert's attendant, the one who appreciated a good man/man romance. It was going to be pretty hard to deny that Zwelberich was behind this now. I was sure Hikaru-kun was right—Prince Rubert wanted to take out Shinichi-kun because he was standing in the way of the prince's marriage to the empress. A lovers' double suicide would be a convenient excuse.

"What a shame," I whispered with a half-smile. Just when I had finally discovered that there were fujoshi in this world, too.

If nothing else, though, I was starting to feel better about our situation. If she'd had any co-conspirators, they would have attacked me long ago. This would-be assassin appeared to be acting alone.

I stood up and looked back. I thought I heard footsteps and sensed someone approaching. When the person finally emerged, though, I could only stare. "Huh?"

It was Shinichi-kun who appeared from between the trees.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. Maybe he had come chasing after me. Out of fear for my safety, no doubt. He was awfully selfless, but by the same token, he could be pretty oblivious to the danger he was in at any given time. It

was great that he was so compassionate towards everyone, but I wished he would be a little more sensitive to how bad that could make things for himself. He acted the way he did not so much out of courage, but out of a strangely low opinion of himself. And because I was his bodyguard, it was my problem.

Anyway...

“Shinichi-kun, it’s still dangerous, you need to—”

“Tifu murottsu!” he shouted over me, raising his right hand. He was aiming... not at me, but just beside me, at the Zwelberichian assassin.

“Huh...?! I whipped around again to see the woman crashing into a tree, her cloak dragging her like a parachute. I watched in astonishment as she slid down the trunk and settled on the ground.

“Sh-Shinichi-kun, haven’t you ever heard of overkill?” I knew she had tried to murder him, but even so, there was no reason to use offensive magic on a helpless opponent.

“It wasn’t overkill,” he said. “Look.” He was pointing at the assassin. No... wait, what?

“Shinichi-sama!” Myusel appeared next—I assumed she had gone after Shinichi-kun—followed by Elvia, still half-carrying Hikaru-kun.

Still looking where Shinichi-kun had pointed, I discovered that there was a bottle, lying half-buried in the leaf mold. It was made of a pale ceramic. I couldn’t tell exactly what was inside, but it was uncorked and rolling on the ground near us.

“I think it’s poison,” Shinichi-kun said. He went over and crouched by the bottle, then thoughtfully took out a handkerchief from his pocket and used it to pick the thing up. Whoever this assassin was, this bottle could be evidence against her. Maybe he’d remembered some detective show he’d seen and realized he needed to avoid touching it. Not that I figured they knew how to lift prints in this world.

“She was lifting it to her mouth,” he explained.

So she *had* only been pretending to be unconscious. Then when my back was

turned, she had intended to drink the poison and kill herself.

“Thanks. I’m impressed you noticed that.”

“When you fail to kill your target, you take yourself out. That’s, like, Assassination 101 in the movies. You know—‘dead men tell no tales’?”

“That’s great and all, but... I think I told you to stay put, didn’t I?”

“Er, yeah... I guess you did. Sorry.” Shinichi-kun shrugged apologetically. I still didn’t understand exactly why, but this boy obviously valued the safety and well-being of others far above his own. That sort of thinking made heroes of some people—but it got lots more ignominiously killed.

“So what do we do with her?” Shinichi-kun said, indicating the assassin.

“I think the best thing we can do is take her to the castle and give her to the authorities.” We were just guests of the Eldant Empire; it wasn’t our place to pass judgment on people from other nations, especially when those people were servants of a visiting royal. Getting unnecessarily involved here had *diplomatic incident* written all over it.

Of course, one could argue that since we had all nearly been murdered, maybe they deserved what they got—but we could leave the Eldant Empire the choice of letting this go. It would give them serious leverage with Zwelberich, a favor they could call in when it really mattered.

“Hikaru-kun, can you walk on your own yet?”

“Er, yeah... Thanks, Elvia. Sorry.” He scrambled away from Elvia. He didn’t look completely steady on his feet yet, but good enough to manage.

“All right, Elvia, then can you carry our new friend?”

“On it!”

“Just watch out. I think she’s unconscious for real this time, but you can’t be too careful.”

“Sure thing!”

Elvia went over and hefted the woman up. That was when Shinichi-kun appeared to notice something.

“Huh? Is she...?”

“Uh-huh. Prince Rubert’s attendant.”

“Yikes!”

Elvia had never seen the woman close up, so she hadn’t connected the dots, but Shinichi-kun and Hikaru-kun both looked suitably shocked. Myusel *had* already met the woman—but in the guise of a fortune-teller. It must have been startling in its own right to realize she was a servant of the royal family of Zwelberich.

“I know we suspected Zwelberich might be behind this, but...”

“To think, the prince’s own attendant was the culprit...”

It was possible the woman wasn’t actually a professional assassin. If Zwelberich had intended to kill Shinichi-kun all along, they certainly would have sent someone with no known association with the prince to do the job. Plausible deniability on the off chance the guy was caught. That suggested this plan had only been dreamed up *after* Prince Rubert had met Shinichi-kun. Only after Rubert realized how close the empress really was to him. He’d had to make do with the people he’d had available.

In any event, all I could do right now was shrug and sigh. “It’s going to take a long time, explaining this to Garius-san and the rest.”



The next day, in the audience chamber of Holy Eldant Castle. From the ornate decorations to the knights who stood at attention, to its sheer size, this was a room purpose-built to communicate the power of the country’s ruler. And right now, the atmosphere inside it was tense.

Petralka was, of course, sitting on the throne at the far end of the room, and as ever, she was flanked by Garius and Prime Minister Zahar. Below their raised dais stood not only the knights, but a panoply of Eldant counselors, along with me, Minori-san, and Hikaru-san, representing Amutech. But for once, we and everyone else there were merely spectators. The real star of the show was Petralka—and the handsome man standing across from her.

Rubert, Sixth Prince of the Kingdom of Zwelberich. The tension in the air came more from the advisors than it did from Petralka and Rubert. Demi-humans like Eric-san and Rydel-san looked especially worried: they had a lot riding on this. Specifically, their entire futures.

For today, Prince Rubert was going home. Petralka would at last have to answer his proposal one way or the other. Depending on what she said, the demi-humans of the Eldant Empire might abruptly find themselves in a very bad place. Nobody expected the Prince of Zwelberich to start being all buddy-buddy with demi-humans just because he married the Empress of the Eldant Empire. Prime Minister Zahar watched the proceedings with unease, shooting anxious glances at the other counselors—and at me—several times. He understood what was at stake for the likes of Eric-san and Rydel-san.

To my surprise, when Petralka finally spoke from the throne, she didn't seem quite able to look up. "Prince Rubert..." The strain in the air thickened. I had no way of knowing whether Petralka noticed it or not, but she looked up as she said, "In regards to the matter of... your proposal..." As she raised her head, I thought her eyes met mine—that she spared the briefest glance in my direction. But maybe I was just overthinking things. The slightest, weariest of smiles tugged at her lips, but she quickly controlled it and looked directly at the prince.

Then she said: "We cordially refuse."

That was it. Three words. All that followed was an almost painful silence.

It didn't last long, though. A buzz started that quickly spread throughout the throne room.

Of course, we of the Amutech contingent had known this would be her answer. But we hadn't had enough time to inform Eric-san or Rydel-san. I glanced over and saw the two of them sharing a very satisfied handshake, as if to say *Yes!* And here I thought elves and dwarves weren't supposed to get along.

"Silence." Garius's voice cut through the chatter.

There was no doubt in Petralka's eyes as she looked at Prince Rubert. I saw no question in her mind. Her expression was calm, composed, as if it came from a

realization or understanding that had given her strength. She looked downright, well, adult. Certainly different from the way she'd seemed when she had come to me for advice.

And as for Rubert...

"Is that so?" he said with a little shrug. "A shame. I am truly disappointed."

The words were those of a man whose marriage proposal had just been turned down, but not a flicker of real emotion passed across his lovely face.

"Will you ask our reasons?"

"No, Your Majesty. I pride myself on accepting defeat graciously." A tiny smile crossed Rubert's face. "Indeed, I rather prefer being rejected with such finality."

"Indeed...?" Petralka returned his slight smile.

"However, the bonds between my nation and the Holy Eldant Empire still stretch back some six hundred years. I have faith that my own unsuitability will in no wise undermine that relationship. May our alliance and our amicable exchange continue as it always has."

"But of course." Petralka and Rubert shared another smile, friendly this time. Somehow, they didn't look like a man whose proposal had just been turned down and the woman who had said no. (Maybe it was just because they were both so pretty?) I thought back to my own moment of romantic rejection and marveled at how a truly cool guy continued to look good in all circumstances.

And then, with surprising suddenness, it was over. And that's the story of how Prince Rubert did *not* get married to Petralka an Eldant III of the Holy Eldant Empire.



About an hour after the assembly in the large audience chamber, I found myself in the small one—the one I was more used to. It was less than half the size of the room we'd been in earlier, and although it was built in much the same style, it had no windows and thicker walls and doors, to enable quieter, more private conversations. Petralka was there, as was Garius, and Prince Rubert.

And one more person. A woman was kneeling in front of Rubert, her hands bound with wooden cuffs and a gag in her mouth. I found the sight a little shocking, but apparently this was standard procedure with criminals in the Eldant Empire, and considering that this person had tried to commit murder, she was probably lucky her situation wasn't any worse.

It was Rubert's attendant. The would-be assassin who had targeted me and my friends.

Petralka began things in a dispassionate, just-the-facts voice. "Last night, Shinichi and other members of his household were attacked at their mansion."

The follow-up came from Garius. "This woman is from Zwelberich. Indeed, she is one of your companions, Prince Rubert, is she not?"

The question was rhetorical, obviously. Garius and Petralka both would have recognized the woman. Not to mention she was clearly visible on the video from Minori-san's in-castle camera—although I strongly suspected we didn't want to have to submit that as evidence if we didn't need to.

Prince Rubert was silent. But he didn't look at me, or at the assassin, or even at Petralka. He stared straight at Garius.

"We won't press matters—this time," the minister said. His tone had changed; he no longer spoke with the stiff formality of someone addressing the prince of an allied nation; instead he sounded almost casual, like he was talking to a friend. The only people in this room were those directly connected to the attempted assassination. Maybe he was signaling that we didn't need to treat this as a state occasion. "I believe the motives of the Zwelberichian party are more or less clear," Garius continued, with a glance at Petralka. "I would never permit this marriage to proceed." His voice carried tremendous finality.

More than a few people, including myself, Eric-san, and Rydel-san, had worried that Garius might be swept up by his feelings for his former boyfriend, Rubert, and welcome a match between the Prince and Petralka. At this point, though, it was looking like we had badly misjudged things.

"Shinichi and his companions may not be Eldant citizens, but they are honored guests of our empire. An attempt to harm them is difficult to overlook. If you had hoped to press your suit with the empress, there were other ways of

doing so. I think you grew a little overeager.”

Garius was Garius. I guess he had been busy investigating things; we just hadn’t known about it. He had looked into things like the political situation in Zwelberich and its relationship with the countries around it. I hadn’t heard the details, but I gathered that something about the domestic situation in Zwelberich at the moment had Prince Rubert at a bit of a political disadvantage. A marriage with Petralka would have allowed him to completely turn the tables.

“We will not forget this matter, but neither do we intend to make it public. We have scarcely more to gain than you do from an open confrontation with the Kingdom of Zwelberich.”

“Mm.” Prince Rubert sensed that this was no time for excuses. A quiet smile tugged at the edges of his lips. “You’re more formidable than you appear.” He looked—not at Garius, but directly at me.

What? Me? Formidable? Huh?

Was he saying that because I had evaded an attempted poisoning and captured an assassin? But that had been all thanks to Elvia and Minori-san, respectively; I had hardly done anything except almost get killed. Or was he addressing me as the representative of my entire group?

But he wasn’t done. “I see it now. You are truly loved.”

“Wha...?” What a weird thing to say. And now, of all times. I just didn’t get this guy... “Wh... What do you mean by that?”

The question was out of my mouth before I could think about it. Prince Rubert didn’t answer, though; he just kept smiling that quiet smile.



Sometime after the refusal in the audience chamber...

Garius and Prince Rubert walked through the halls of the castle, looking almost like they were trying to avoid being noticed, and went out into the courtyard together—alone together. They found the shadow of a large tree to stand in, somewhere it wouldn’t be easy to spot them. And there...

Rubert looked around the neatly manicured garden. After a long silence, as if

the question had just occurred to him, he asked, “How long have you known?”

“From the start,” Garius said, standing beside Rubert. There was no inflection in his voice, and he didn’t look at the Prince. He stood completely still, clearly almost forcing himself not to move. His emerald eyes just stared straight ahead. He seemed intent on keeping a small but unwavering distance between them. “I knew why you had proposed, and I had no interest in letting it go forward.”

“I see...” Rubert smiled and nodded. The look on his face was downright untroubled. Was he impressed that his plans had been so thoroughly thwarted? Or did he just want to maintain the appearance that it didn’t bother him? “Here I was sure I had you fooled.”

“You thought...” Garius said softly. He sounded almost emotional. “Looking back... All the way back. The way you befriended me, stayed close to me. Was all of that just part of a grand design to make this possible?”

What a question. He wanted to know, in other words, whether everything that had happened between them while he was in Zwelberich, the relationship they’d had, if it had all been part of a plan leading up to this moment. Was he really asking that? Even I knew that was years and years ago, but if so...

“Oh, yes, of course,” Prince Rubert answered without hesitation.

He actually admitted it!

“Naturally, I didn’t have these specific circumstances in mind. But I’m an adept enough player of this game to have known that *somewhere* along the line, a friendship with you was likely to come in useful.”

“So the things you whispered to me, it was all—”

“We lot’re royals,” Rubert interrupted, switching to a brusque tone of voice. “And as such, the freedom to love is something we don’t have and will never have. We’re a part of the machinery of the state. Tools to be used to shore up its fortunes. Your own feelings, any affection for anyone else—if it can be used, you use it. That’s what it means to be a member of a royal family. And in return, we’re granted endless powers and privileges. Am I wrong?” He looked Garius in the face, seeking confirmation.

This beautiful young man who had just confessed to being a master strategist

—the gentle smile had vanished from his face as if it had never been there. In its place was an emotionless mask.

Garius said nothing; he simply stood there. He, too, was expressionless. For an instant—the barest fraction of a second—I thought I had seen his face flinch, like a child’s the moment before he bursts into tears. But I blinked, and found Garius just as composed as ever.

“No, you’re not,” Garius said with a shake of his head. “Everything is exactly as you say.”

Prince Rubert met this with an ambiguous smile. He didn’t look especially pleased to hear Garius agree with him. Instead, he almost looked...

“Well, I believe it’s time for me to be going.” With that, Rubert set off across the courtyard with all dignity. Neither man betrayed any pain at their parting. Rubert didn’t stop, didn’t look back, but disappeared into the castle. For his part, Garius just kept staring in one direction.

I had never seen such an abrupt goodbye.

But I wasn’t the only one here to appreciate this.

“Pant... Pant...”

When I noticed how heavily Minori-san was breathing, how bloodshot her eyes were, there in the shadows from which we had been watching the conversation, I quickly moved to restrain her.

“IS—”

Hikaru-san and I both clapped a hand over her mouth to prevent another outburst of “IS THAT **REALLY** REAL ACTUAL BL” or whatever was coming. Minori-san tried to fight us, but Loek and Romilda jumped on her, too. They had been here at the castle with their parents, and Hikaru-san had brought them along in case we had any more “incidents.” It turned out he had been right to worry.

“Mmmrrrf! Mrrmm!!” Minori-san was still trying to shout something in spite of our impromptu gag. Thankfully, blocked by two palms, her voice didn’t carry. It did kind of tickle, the way her lips were moving against my hand, but I could

bear it.

Suddenly, though, I felt Minori-san's body go limp. *Huh?* Had we been a little too enthusiastic blocking her mouth and suffocated her?

"M-Minori-sensei?" Loek and Romilda jumped back. Our rotten WAC slumped to her knees; in fact, she proceeded to fall face-first onto the ground. Her lips opened and closed like she was having trouble breathing. Worried now, I put my ear close to her flapping mouth.

"...Koganuma Minori... regrets... nothing..."

Ahh. Having observed an all-too-loaded conversation between two handsome guys at close distance, she had become terminally moe. You know, when your heart bursts from sheer delight?

I took this in in an instant, and felt better. She would be fine. We could leave her alone.

Loek and Romilda, though, naturally didn't realize what was going on. "Minori-sensei!"

"Don't die on us!"

They helplessly shook Minori-san, still on the ground and completely white (figuratively speaking) from moe overload. Then...

"Shinichi... Is that you?" Garius turned toward us and called out.

I guess you can't exactly hide five people at close range making that kind of noise.

"No, it's uh—"

"You heard everything?" He had a slight smile on his face. It didn't look like he was going to chew us out for eavesdropping. In fact, I thought he seemed almost relieved. He didn't seem like his usual, unflappable self, but almost like a little kid who hadn't been sure what to do. The only real question was how I should respond. Before I could figure it out, though— "You're up, Shinichi-kun." Minori-san, who had come back to life in the meantime, put a hand on my shoulder and whispered in my ear.

"What...?"

She had been on death's doorstep just a moment before, but now her fingers were digging into my shoulder so hard it was uncomfortable. Adjusting her glasses with her free hand, she said, "The only cure for the agony of love spurned is a new love born."

"I don't know *what* you're talking about. Hey, ouch, that hurts!" I looked at Hikaru-san, standing beside Minori-san, as if to say *Help me!*, but he grabbed my shoulder, too.

"Minori-san's right," he said. "You're the only one who can comfort Minister Cordobal now."

"Yikes!" The next moment, the two of them were shoving me forward, out of the shadows. Directly at Garius. "Uh, um, uhh..." It was all I could do not to fall over. A few stumbling steps later, I found myself standing in front of the knight. Our eyes met. "Uhhhhh... ahem."

I quickly looked away, no idea what to say to him. I could see Minori-san and Hikaru-san both clenching their fists and nodding at me from the shadows, urging me on. But what the heck were they expecting from me? I mean, I knew. But still...

"That's a lot to put on my shoulders..."

Even I could tell how wounded and dejected Garius was feeling. Setting aside all the liking-men stuff, I *did* want to make him feel better somehow, if I could. But I was a girlfriendless shut-in of a NEET who had never so much as been on a date, so what was I supposed to do?

Garius smiled a little to see me so at a loss. "It seems you've caught me at a rather less than flattering moment." Then he turned away, as if he didn't want me to see his face right now.

He started walking. Was he just going to walk away? His bearing was as regal as ever, yet the disappointment in his mood was almost palpable.

"H-Hey, Garius-san?"

"Hm?"

He stopped. *Thank goodness.*

He glanced over his shoulder at me, and I scoured my brain for something comforting to say. I played back the conversation I'd just heard in my mind, desperate to find some other spin I could put on the words.

And then it came to me.

"That thing Prince Rubert said earlier..."

Your own feelings, any affection for anyone else—if it can be used, you use it, he'd said.

"Wasn't he pretty much admitting that he cares about you, Garius-san?"

Something unusual happened then: Garius's eyes went wide in an expression of surprise.

"Yes, he ended up using those feelings for political ends, but the feelings themselves were real, right? He's, like, the ultimate *tsundere*."

The same was true of what he had said before that. *The freedom to love is something we don't have and will never have.* Wasn't that, in essence, a way of lamenting that because he was born a royal, Rubert could never openly express his love for Garius, however great that love might be?

Garius stood silent for what seemed like ages.

"Of... of course, that's just my... my personal interpretation..." I said, rapidly losing confidence. Garius knew Rubert about a million times better than I did. I was just an ignorant outsider offering baseless speculation.

Finally, Garius said, "I see." After what appeared to be a moment's contemplation, he smiled a peaceful smile. The way he narrowed his eyes, the way his expression looked almost affectionate—in a way, it reminded me of Petralka. No question the two of them were related. He didn't exactly look like he was suddenly full of energy, but the shroud of darkness that had seemed to hang over him a few minutes before had dispersed. Assuming I wasn't just imagining that, then I guess I had managed to make him feel at least a little better.

I let out a little breath. "Well, uh, I guess I'd better be going..."

Job done, I turned to go back to my friends, who were still "hiding" nearby.

About a second later, though, someone pulled on my hand so hard I almost pitched forward. It was Garius, who had come up quickly.

“Thank you, Shinichi,” he said, still grasping my hand tightly.

“D-Don’t mention it. I’m glad you’re feeling a little better.”

Garius’s face was definitely closer to mine than was absolutely necessary. I looked away from him a bit.

He seemed to be feeling better, and that was what mattered. I had done my part, so I wanted to go back to my friends. I wanted to get out of here! (I *really* did, so I’m saying it twice!) Garius, though, didn’t seem to pick up on my private wish. “Your help, Shinichi, seems to have relieved me of a great many burdens,” he said. “For that, I must thank you.” He smiled tenderly at me.

...Tenderly?

“G-Gee, that’s great...”

“If I may ask, have you no thoughts about these recent events?”

“Huh? Should there be?”

“I see...”

Excuse me...?

I thought I saw a shadow pass over Garius’s face, but maybe I was just imagining it. The gaze he leveled at me was so intense... I found myself wishing I could look away, or at least get this over with. Quickly. Please?

“U-Um...”

I had a rapidly expanding bad feeling. I glanced back at the others in hopes of rescue, but Loek and Romilda were just watching, wide-eyed but uncomprehending; Hikaru-san was positively enjoying this; and Minori-san was giving me a huge thumbs-up.

Forget the encouragement, guys!

“Shinichi.” Garius almost whispered my name. His face was very, very close.

Too close! Too close!

If this were a gal game, I'd be wondering where I had taken the wrong path. That thought constituted my attempt to escape from reality as the door to a new world forced itself open before me.



It was several days since Prince Rubert had gone home. The employees of Amutech were in the small audience chamber, giving our regular report. Myusel was with us today. Partly that was because she was slated to teach at school—but it was also because as a half-elf, and a maid at that, she had been understandably avoiding the castle while Prince Rubert was here.

The first thing Petralka said from her place on her throne was, “These events have provided a valuable lesson.”

“What events?” I asked.

“Everything involving Prince Rubert,” Petralka said with a thin smile. It had been days since the prince left, so I'd thought maybe she was talking about something else, but apparently the prince and everything that had happened with him was still in her mind. “There is no need to hurry,” Petralka said, and for some reason she looked away from me, into the distance. “We have decided that we shall take time to consider, to think, and to find an answer.”

An answer? She'd already answered Prince Rubert's marriage proposal... ahh. But there were sure to be a lot more proposals in the future, and she would have to think about what to say. To me, as a twenty-first-century Japanese person, Petralka still seemed young—maybe too young to be getting married. But this world thought differently. Women married younger, and empresses were seen as eligible earlier than most. Suitors would come from both inside and outside Eldant. She'd refused this time, effectively returning us to the status quo. But the idea of marriage had been planted in Petralka's mind, and it wasn't going to go away.

“By the standards of Ja-pan, we are yet young to be married, is that not so?”

“Er, yeah. Yeah, that's true.”

In fact, people were marrying later and later in Japan—the plummeting birthrate was becoming a real problem—but I figured most places in the world

would consider your mid-teens pretty early to be getting married. Considering how bothered Petralka was by her childish looks, I wondered if she might see marriage as a sign of adulthood, and be eager to get hitched because it would help show that she was fully grown up. But then again, nothing says *still a kid* like the urge to prove you're an adult.

From that perspective, maybe Petralka had started to mature. To become an adult, you have to start by recognizing that you're a child. Or at least, I thought so. I was hardly a wizened old man myself, so maybe I wasn't one to talk.

"That being the case..." Petralka leaned on the right arm of her throne and looked—not at me, but at Myusel. The maid promptly straightened up. "We will not brook your overtaking us while we take our time to think, Myusel."

"Wha...?" The befuddled interjection came not from Myusel, but from me. Why was Petralka suddenly talking to my maid? Was she telling Myusel not to marry anyone before Petralka herself did? No, that would be tyrannical, wouldn't it? Or did she have something else in mind?

It looked like I was the only person who was confused, though. Myusel sort of shuddered fearfully, but then, to my surprise, she replied with a firm nod.

"Understood, Your Majesty."

"Mm." Petralka nodded back at her.



An empress nodding at a maid was like the heavens nodding at the earth, yet the two of them seemed to be recognizing each other almost like friendly rivals. Or was that just my overactive imagination? I was starting to feel uncomfortable; I wasn't sure where to put my eyes. My gaze was just darting this way and that when it happened to meet Garius's eyes as he stood beside Petralka.

Oops. Now that I had looked straight at him, I couldn't exactly look immediately away again. I forced myself to smile as pleasantly as I could and tried to think of something harmless to say.

"Uh, I guess it's been a bit of a rough few days for you too, huh, Garius-san?"

Shoot! I didn't realize until the words were out of my mouth that it wasn't really the right thing to say. It was like pouring salt in his wounds.

But Garius, with no sign of offense, said, "Not at all." In fact, his smile seemed more genuine than ever. "These events offered me a chance to do some thinking as well."

"Oh, uh, they did?"

Garius looked so... cheerful. I guess he considered the matter of Rubert settled for the time being. I didn't know how he had managed to accept it so quickly, but if he felt okay about it, and even thought he had learned something from it, then that was great.

Still smiling, Garius went on, "Value the truth of things above appearances and pretensions—that's one way."

"Come again...?"

"A public marriage may not be necessary, if the substance of the relationship amounts to the same thing. It's just a possibility."

"Huh...?"

What *was* he talking about? Er, I mean, if Prince Rubert had married Petralka, then Garius would practically be—well, I knew we had considered that possibility, the idea that one royal marriage could serve two purposes. But why bring that up now? And why look at me while he said it? And so seriously?

I was just starting to really sweat when Petralka clapped her hands and exclaimed “Yes! That is indeed a possibility!”

I guess this made sense to her somehow.

“Ow!” I was still at a loss to understand what was going on when somebody pounded me on the back. I glanced over my shoulder to find Minori-san, using one hand to cover her mouth and the other to slap me heedlessly on the back. Again and again. It was like she couldn’t hold it in. What the heck was going on?

“A public proposal? Garius-san... oh, what an operator!” Minori-san exclaimed gleefully.

“Er...?”

“Oh, come on! You don’t have to be embarrassed!” She continued to smack my shoulder, practically laughing out loud.

Well, at least there was one thing I understood. I might not know what was going on, but it was obvious that Minori-san had completely lost it. Again.

“I’m sorry, I *don’t* know what you’re talking about. And that really hurts.” She might be a girl, but as a trained member of the military, her open-handed slap was enormously powerful. And painful.

“Uh—Um, Shinichi-sama?”

“Huh? Wh-What is it, Myusel?”

“I’ll... I’ll be sure to give it my all, too...!”

“Huh? All of your what?”

Even Myusel was jumping on the nonsense train now? She had clenched her fists in a kind of *I’m-on-it!* pose. Was I seriously the only one who wasn’t getting this?

“H-Hey, Hikaru-san...” I said, turning to the one person who had been quiet the whole time so far. He was given to outbursts of 100% chuunibyou-ism, sure, but his slantwise take on things had a sort of rationality all its own. I figured he probably had the closest thing to an objective perspective on whatever was going on here. “C-Can you explain—”

But Hikaru-san didn't say anything, just put a hand to his cheek and let out a very long sigh. Then he narrowed his eyes at me and finally spoke: "I really, really want to hit you right now."

"What?!"

"Yeah, no kidding."

"Y-You too, Minori-san?!"

So I really *was* the only one who wasn't getting it?!

"Do you think maybe he has some kind of sickness that makes him this dense?"

A sickness! They said I was sick!

Wait—and dense?! Why?

"C-Come on, what's happening?"

"Ohhhh..." Hikaru-san let out a very pointed sigh.

.....*Oh.*

Then, and only then, I finally put the pieces together.

Myusel. Petralka. And me.

That was—but we— Hikaru-san gave me a sarcastic look where I had frozen with fear, sweat dripping down my brow.

"Eh, looks like you've got plenty of time," he said. "Think about your options and get back to us."

(つづく)

To be continued...

Afterword Hullo, light novelist Sakaki here, bringing you Volume 12 of *Outbreak Company: The Power of Moe*.

At long last, this is the volume you’ve all been waiting for! The one focused directly on..... *him!*

.....

.....

Um... er. You *were* waiting for it, weren’t you? (**Crickets**) To be fair, he didn’t end up having the cover to himself. He and Petralka have a sort of sibling (?) shot there. We were afraid that if it was just Garius on the front, people would have to double-check that they were actually reading *Outbreak Company*. Or that it might accidentally get shelved with the BL... (Okay, we were thinking too hard.) You might be interested to know that I never originally intended to do this plot. Hadn’t even thought of it. But the moment *Outbreak* became an anime...

“Sakaki-san. This is the moment. This is when you do the story about Garius’s ex-boyfriend! You *know* there has to be a handsome someone in his past from when he was studying abroad somewhere! They (BLEEP) and they (BLEEEEEEP) and they murmur ‘It’s been so long...’ while touching each other’s hair...!”

Thus my friend, an author, known for light novels like *Gun Princess* and *Carly*, regular novels like the *Tokkan* series, and also even manga like *Makai Ouji*—so pretty well-known all around, is what I’m saying—Takadono Madoka insisted—er, persuaded me, and so I wrote this story.

Thank you, Takadono-sensei. No, really.

I left the broad contours of this story about Garius and his ex-boyfriend to my thoroughly rotten assistant (“Leave the brainstorming to me! In fact, just let me write the whole thing!”), and she got to it with an enthusiasm worthy of Minori-san. I’ve been known to turn to her for Minori-san’s dialogue before (with appropriate touch-ups by me to make sure they’re in-character and fit with the

surrounding dialogue), but this was something new, what with the entire story having certain proclivities.

When it comes to stuff like the floor and the ceiling never meeting, or a spoon that's being chatted up by a fork... I mean, that stuff just wouldn't have occurred to me. The possibilities are truly limitless.

Once again, this tale started life as a short story, but grew in the writing until it filled an entire volume all by itself. I was a little worried that if I focused exclusively on the relationship between Garius and Rubert, I might discover some places within myself that I really didn't want to find (or am I just imagining that? I am, aren't I?), so I handled it this way instead.

And so we have Minori-san going completely off the deep end in this volume. I'm no Loek, but I kind of think she's cutest when she's like this...

For the past two or three volumes now, I've been gradually pointing the series toward its conclusion (not to say it's coming anytime soon, mind you), and that includes my attempt in this book to start to shatter the love triangle (or however many sides this polygon has by now). It may prove to be a crucial volume in terms of Petralka's story.

Even I, the author, don't know for sure yet whether Shinichi will end up making a harem proper, or getting himself stabbed to death by someone (hey!), or something else entirely—all I know is I hope my dear and endlessly indulgent readers will come along for the ride (grin).

By the way, I didn't put too fine a point on this, but that thing at the end of Volume 11? The power of a bucket of cold water and one very engaged Minori-san helped Shinichi keep his innocence—or, like, something, I guess.

So there you have it: Volume 12, the quintessential love story. Things are only going to get bigger and better from here. See you for Volume 13!

Sakaki Ichiro 29 Jan 2015



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Outbreak Company: Volume 12

by Ichiro Sakaki

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Ebook edition 1.0: December 2019

✧ Ichiro Sakaki
Illustration Yuugen

Outbreak Company

THE POWER OF MOE

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